

# SOCIETY OF EVIL

(Continued from A WORLD OF BONES)

BY

JAMES C. BURKE

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For information contact:

James C. Burke  
jamescburke@live.com

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## PREFACE

In *A World of Bones*, railroad freight office clerk Ethel Rouse, through her amateur sleuthing, stumbles into an ongoing missing person investigation. The Sheriff of Gilridge County, George Tate, recognizing her quick mind and other exceptional abilities, hires her to research county records. With the help of a history professor at the local college, their investigation leads unexpectedly to a long-forgotten brick culvert under the town running to the river. Bootleggers have been using it to supply the town's speakeasies. The missing persons and liquor running investigations intersect with a minor member of one of the county's first families, Mrs. Ida Huffman. Before her arrest, she is killed by a bomb. Her daughter-in-law, Lucille, is suspected of contracting the murder, but was proven insane during her trial. While the book closes without a resolution of the cases of the unexplained disappearances, Sheriff Tate and Coroner Hugh Wilson suspect a criminal syndicate is operating in their placid Southern college town (A WORLD OF BONES is available on Archive.org at <https://archive.org/details/AWORLDOFBONESPARTONEType> set.)

Continuing the story, *Society of Evil* presents three investigations from 1922-23 that convince Sheriff Tate that a clandestine coalition of individuals from the first families of Gilridge County are responsible for mysterious disappearances and unexplained deaths stretching back to Reconstruction. He also suspects that the same control the local market for bootleg liquor. Ethel Rouse, the first female deputy sheriff in the history of the county, uses her research skills and powers of deduction to lead Tate along the right path. Regrettably, when they have enough evidence to isolate suspects, they turn up dead. Nevertheless, the sheriff and his intrepid sister-in-law expose hitherto unimagined

layers of corruption beneath the pleasant veneer that Gilridge projects.

A significant player in these three cases is Elwood Dibble, Ethel's childhood sweetheart. While good natured and honest, he feigns the image of being a tough guy in the working class neighborhoods where his family runs their business. They have long been the target of intimidation by a gang known as "Gray Hoods". As a result, the Dibble family is secretive. Though Ethel still likes Elwood, she has little patience with his unwillingness to tell her the whole truth about anything. Uncharacteristically, she is inclined to bully and torment him in order that he might be persuaded him to follow the dictates of his conscious. In spite Elwood's antagonistic stance towards Ethel, he is both loyal and protective of her. Likewise, Ethel reflects these qualities towards him.

[This series continues with Part III – THE KINSFOLK.]



## THE GRAY HOODS

*January 25, 1922.* No sooner had Ethel sat down in her chair and started munching on a chocolate bar did Sheriff Tate place an antique Colt .41 Long revolver on the desktop in front of her. He said,

“I’m issuing this to you. One of the county commissioners brought it up at the last meeting, so there you go.” Ethel’s jaw dropped. She said,

“What?”

“Have you ever shot a gun?”

“No!”

“We’ll get to that later. Put it in your bag.”

“What if it goes off?”

“It will not go off, Ethel. We don’t even have bullets for that old thing... at least, not at the moment.”

“That is not going to fit in my bag!”

“It would if you didn’t carry around the whole kitchen cupboard with you.” Carefully, she picked up the revolver with both hands, then said,

“This thing must weigh ten pounds!”

“No, it doesn’t. Why do you always give me a hard time when it comes to getting you in line with the rest? Where is your badge?” Ethel frowned, and then dumped the contents of her large velvet handbag on the desk. In addition to three tins of sardines, two chocolate bars, three sticks of peppermint, a biscuit wrapped in wax paper, six pencils, a notepad, two dollars in change, a bankbook, a hairbrush, three rings, a cloth tape measure, two handkerchiefs, and two forks there was an antique brass star engraved with the word “Deputy.” Holding it up to Tate, she said,

“It’s tarnished, and it doesn’t look like the rest! I want a pretty badge.” Tate shook his head in aggravation.

“Ethel, I will get you a pretty badge in due time. I’ll order you up the best they make, and give it to you for a Christmas present; but for now, I have to fit you up with what we have on hand. That dang-fool commissioner wants to give me a hard time because you are a relative, and a lady one, too; but that’s not all of it.” He then called out loudly, “Wilkes! Deputy Rouse is waiting for you!”

In an instant, Ethel’s disposition changed. A board smile appeared on her face as the tall, soft-spoken Deputy Wilkes approached the desk. There was something about the gentlemanly and boyishly handsome Wilkes that Ethel liked ever since their first awkward meeting. She was snooping around by herself and became caught up in a speakeasy raid. Wilkes, on Tate’s instructions, extracted her from an embarrassing situation. They were also teamed together when the Huffman house blew up. Tate told Wilkes,

“I want you to show Ethel how to maintain her firearm, and then take her out for some target practice. I have plans for her, so she needs to defend herself. Work her until she is a crack shot. By the way, her revolver is old and not like the rest; so, pay a visit to the hardware store. While you out and about, take her by the tailor and have her measured for a coat in the same style as the rest; except, not as long as the one she has on and there needs to be room for her bosoms.” Ethel stamped her foot and glared at Tate.

“Sheriff, I am a lady! You will not be talking about my bosoms! Tell him to say that the jacket needs to be fitted to my figure. My word, sir; you would not dare say such inconsiderate things in the presence of my sister.” Wilkes asked,

“If I can be so bold to say, it sounds like you’re getting Miss Rouse ready for something soon?”

“Yes and the two of you will be paired up for it, too. Nothing dangerous, as far as I can tell; but keep in mind that she is my sister-in-law, and it is your responsibility to make sure nothing happens to her. It starts with teaching her what is the right and wrong way of using that revolver. She is a pretty mess, but I have to admit that she is also smarter than the two of us put together... Ah-ha, now you see her smiling!” Ethel turned to Wilkes, then said,



“Do you like sardines?” Tate interjected,

“Since you brought up the subject, I do not want you throwing those smelly cans in with the waste paper. Take them outside!” She replied,

“Wouldn’t it be nice if you put in a word to the tailor to give me extra pockets? Particularly, since I will be loaded down with all this scrap iron...” Wilkes added,

“She needs a holster.”

Tate placed his hand on his forehead, and nodded. She smiled, handed her revolver to Wilkes, and the two embarked on their day of shopping and adventure. Tate went into his office to plan the raid on an *ad hoc* speakeasy in the northern part of the county. Having ample intelligence about the place, he knew it was going to be an easy victory. Posing as a couple, Ethel and Wilkes would pay a visit before the raid commenced to listen in on the talk; then make their way out before the sheriff and his men busted through. Then he could justify keeping her on for undercover assignments. The loudmouth commissioner would have to lay-off.

Even though Gilridge was a Southern town steeped in antiquated notions, its character was somewhat schizophrenic: it was a railroad town; it was a port; and Quinley Hogg College and its surrounding neighborhoods was a town by its own right. Beyond that, the textile mills were in the north side suburbs; and further out, farmlands. The county commissioners were so divergent in their agendas; they likely would be meddling in another department by the next meeting. The problem with this devious scheme was the sheriff was *using* Ethel. He had always used her, albeit an affectionate form of manipulation.

*February 17, 1922.* Out near a wooded area near the river known as Sandyfield, Deputy Wilkes watched in amazement as Ethel carefully fired off one bullseye after another at the target. Her movements were rhythmic, one step after another. In her mind, there was a beat accompanying the movements – standing, loading, taking

aim, firing, expelling her expended rounds, and reloading. Wilkes said,

“I thought you said you never shot before the sheriff brought you on?” Tightening her lips, she looked at him and said,

“That’s right, Deputy Wilkes.” He unexpectedly tossed a tin can upward, and Ethel shot it in midair. She said,

“Stop playing with me, sir. I am doing just as you said; so, isn’t it good enough yet? My hand is getting tired. Actually, it is starting to hurt... Despite it all, this thing points just right... I mean, it does not shoot over this way or that – perfect.”

“It has a long barrel. That helps.”

“Very well; but, how much longer? My ears are ringing...” She fired the remainder of her rounds at the bullseye of the target. “That’s it, sir. I am not doing any more practice today.” She removed the spent cartridges from her revolver, and presented it to Wilkes with the barrel pointing to the ground.” She said tersely, “Inspect!” Carefully, he examined the weapon, and then handed it back to her, and said,

“Very well... let us go through the proper maintenance once again.”

Ethel picked up skills quickly, unlike most people. Music and dance were her most refined talents, and it gave her movement consistency and fluidity. She was very observant of her surroundings, and could sense depth and distance exceptionally well. Sheriff Tate had witnessed his sister-in-law agilely skipping over slippery stone blocks in the river, dangling upside down off a pier, and dashing a block without getting winded. She was in better shape than any of his deputies. Wilkes, too, was very impressed with her; and deep down, he liked her. His sense of honor kept him from entertaining these thoughts long. Likewise, Ethel was attracted to Wilkes, and enjoyed being around him; but the feeling that she relished his company more than was proper gave her feelings of guilt. After all, she was engaged. On an impulse, she fell in love with a college professor after her sister gave up on him. Clearly, it would be wrong

to abandon her commitment since she had issued the ultimatum to the man to marry her or find somebody else. His accident put an end to any thoughts of lighthearted play. Life had been easier when she was unattached.

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When Ethel returned from her lunch break, Sheriff Tate called her into his office.

"If you are finished with recess, I would like to set your mind to working on some curiosities - the sort of thing that I hired you for in the first place. We have a number of unsolved cases, some dating back to the days when my daddy was sheriff. In fact, that is where I would like for you to start. In 1898, there was an accident on the Northeast River Bridge, about ten miles up the track. At one time, so many people were run over or fell in the river and drown trying to cross that bridge to get to the depot on the other side. The railroad built a sheltered platform at the turnout so they can stop for passengers on both sides. All the same, some folks still walk across that bridge despite the danger. The accident that I'm thinking about is different in several puzzling respects: it was night; it was near freezing and the man was in his shirt sleeves. According to the coroner's report, he was likely drunk; and he was a deputy in this department." Ethel asked,

"Was he given to drinking?"

"Daddy thinks not. Furthermore, there was no reason for him to be out there. His assigned district was the townships south of Gilridge. There are a lot of things that don't add up."

"The Northeast District is a very desolate part of the county - a few farms, but mostly pine forest. There was a boatyard a few miles upriver from the bridge, but it shut down and moved to new shops on the Southside docks."

After Ethel settled into her nook in the records room, she pulled the report on the investigation into the death of Deputy Hiram Newton. The incident occurred at two in the morning, not long after

the night mail train left Northeast Depot, two miles north from the twelve-mile mark and approximately three miles from the bridge. The bridge is three hundred and sixty-two feet from one abutment to the other. Built in 1878, it consists of four spans resting on three stone piers. A boxy construction of wrought and cast iron, it is wide enough to accommodate a train, and was never intended for pedestrian traffic. Thirty-six feet below, the swift current of the Northeast River is a formidable hazard in itself, even for a sober person in top condition. Ethel asked herself whether there were other incidents that occurred on the bridge that resembled the “accidental death” of Deputy Newton in the most significant aspects, namely, not having any reason for being in that district, and the victim was considered to have acted in an uncharacteristic fashion. Before she was able to continue her inquiry, the workday was done.

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After her twin sister Liz married Sheriff Tate, Ethel moved out of the flat the twins shared over McNeely’s Shoes & Boots. Her new residence was in a cottage on Chestnut Avenue, about two blocks removed from her fiancé’s house. If he needed her, she was close at hand. He had undergone several painful operations that left him unable to move about easily without assistance. That aside, she thought it was a pleasant location, and a far cry safer than downtown. Ethel, however, missed the companionship of her sister and the lively surroundings of the depot. Yet, being alone in a crowd seemed so much lonelier than simply being alone. So, on Saturday, January 14, Ethel dragged her trunk down the iron steps at McNeely’s to the Packard; loaded up her box of kitchen utensils, phonograph, and books; and bade goodbye to the carefree life that slipped away the past year into memory.

The environs of Ethel’s new abode were quiet, serene, and hauntingly nostalgic. Colossal evergreen oaks spread their branches over the street. All the houses were set back from the sidewalk with front lawns adorned with ornamental shrubs. Her little cottage was decorated with delicate spandrel on the porch and vergeboard under the gables. It was old fashion, but very pretty. The interior was fitted

with a gas heater and stove. Otherwise, it was entirely empty with the exception of a kitchen table and two chairs left by a former tenant. She needed a bed. Patience Lawson, the mother of Professor Julia Powell, the Special Collections librarian at Quinley Hogg College, came to her aid. In spirit and temperament, Patience was very much like Ethel. The two met while Professor Powell was researching the antebellum system of brick culverts in the old section of town. Sheriff Tate correctly suspected some were being used by bootleggers to store liquor. Patience asked her daughter to give Ethel a bed and a dresser from one of the guest rooms in the Powell House. Julia also included several other articles of furniture that were never used. Her husband, Dr. William Powell, recruited two of his students to move the items for a good meal and a little spending money. By eight thirty that Saturday evening, Ethel was settled into her new home. She could hardly imagine at the moment – or any time in the near future – that she would purchase the house in a few years.

Living alone suited Ethel well, allowing her eccentricities full scope. Of all her unusual attributes, the most obvious was a voracious appetite that could only be satiated by round-the-clock consumption of curious snacks. At the top of the menu were sardines and chocolate bars, consumed together in alternating bites. Her favorite sandwich – an item she usually purchased by the bag-full – was bacon, fried egg, pimentos and grated horseradish on toasted buttered bread. She loved pickled eggs, thinly sliced raw turnips, and hard biscuits flavored with ginger. Her handbag was a cornucopia of goodies that she freely munched on around the clock. Sheriff Tate paid little mind to this behavior, but it was the only concession he allowed.

After her evening snack, she changed into her house clothes, placed a record on the phonograph, and practiced her dance steps for an hour. Next, she washed and ironed her work clothes, followed by her bath. Before going to bed, she studied textbooks used in the standard undergraduate curriculum – acquired for her by Dr. White. She planned to enroll in classes eventually. She craved knowledge.

This Friday, Ethel came home after dark exhausted. From the crack of dawn until eleven, like the day before, Deputy Wilkes drilled her on the various protocols of being an officer of the law in the field. The legal aspects – class work, essentially – fascinated her, but the hour of target practice left her sore, dirty, and cantankerous. Before returning to the office, she was sent home to wash up, dress, and have lunch. Having to return by half-past twelve precluded leisurely enjoyment of the latter. Upon returning, Ethel was dressed in uniform. This, not yet established for female deputies, was the same black wool skirt and white blouse she wore as a clerk in the railroad freight office – certainly, appropriate for her new position – and the modified standard departmental gray coat – still too long, but having the ample pockets she requested. She wore a plain, broad-rimmed black hat of her own because the department did not have anything suitable. Tate repeatedly promised to bring her uniform and equipment up to current standards in time, but she had to work with what was available. At least her antique badge was presentable. The gentlemen at the hardware store polished it to a mirror shine when they were restoring her Colt revolver. Generally, Ethel thought there was something unseemly about a lady working with anything associated with apprehending criminals. Making everything clean and shiny bright didn't change the nature of her gear, but she felt the feminine attention to proper appearance made them more acceptable to her. Sheriff Tate had impressed upon Ethel that some snooty ladies might shun her now; but in time, their daughters, following in her footsteps, would revere her. That aside, being connected by marriage to a family of three generations of sheriffs plus a few state senators made her presence in his office seem more authentic, if not the natural course of things. Ethel accepted this pronouncement as a suitable rationale for addressing anybody that might pose questions; but secretly, she was apprehensive. Unraveling conundrums through the method she enjoyed most, researching documents, was the part of the job that made it all worthwhile.

After entering the house, Ethel went immediately to the kitchen to prepare supper. True to her peculiar dietary habits, she prepared bacon, eggs, and fried, dried banana on toast with molasses – essentially, breakfast. After rinsing the dishes, she washed her

blouses and stockings in the sink. One at a time, she wrung them out with her hands, then starched and ironed the blouses. Occasionally, she returned the old iron to the stove burner to reheat it. Never in her life had she used a laundry service. During this routine she revisited her thoughts concerning the Hiram Newton case. Vaguely, she recalled hearing her father talk about the accident when she was a girl. He was the conductor on the evening express coming into town when the locomotive struck a man on the Northeast River Bridge. He said that it had happened several times before in the exact same way.

*February 18, 1922.* Ethel decided to make a visit to the *Messenger* office to peruse their archive of old issues. While it was unlikely she would receive much help from the weekend staff, there was a starting point, 1898. Also, by stopping by the records room at work on her way to the newspaper, she could review the official report of the Lewis accident for comparison. Ethel only hoped that Sheriff Tate would not return before she finished. Certainly, if she was at hand, he would put her on other work. Visiting the newspaper first seemed the best idea. It did not take her long to find the issue. It read,

“At twenty past eight Saturday evening, the evening expressed barreled onto the bridge and over the body of Hiram Lewis, a deputy with the Gilridge County Sheriff, ripping him to pieces. The engineer never saw Lewis, but felt when the locomotive rolled over him. The passengers saw nothing. It appeared to be an encounter between a train and an intoxicated man, a perennial occurrence as old as railroading. Sheriff William Tate and Dr. John Wilson, county coroner, arrived at the scene of the accident at about half past nine. Making it onto the bridge, led by the conductor, Horace Rouse, they came to the place where the intact portion of the man’s remains rested. His whole lower section was missing, presumably thrown into the river. His entrails were strewn about on the bridge deck. Why was he out in these desolate parts? Deputy Lewis will be sorely missed by the citizens he served in the southern part of the county.”

The article mentioned the similarity between the 1898 accident, and two others, in 1881 and 1875. Officials from the railroad were

quoted as saying the company planned to erect a sheltered platform at the turnout of the Gilridge County side of the river. Even though traffic did not justify it, it might discourage passengers from walking the bridge. Trains would stop there only if a passenger was getting off or being taken on. A *pro rata* ticket could be purchased when going between the turnout and Northeast Depot. Ethel decided to set her work aside at the *Messenger* so she might make a quick visit to the department.

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Upon arriving at the office, Ethel dashed to the records room. There, she searched the shelves to find the 1881 case log – the year was stamped on the spine of the book. The entries in the log ran chronologically; however, they were not indexed. Each case was assigned a number which, in turn, corresponded to the investigation report. Most of the crimes entered into the log were of a trifling nature, namely, brawling, public drunkenness, theft of chickens, and the like. Ethel recognized these in a glance, and flipped to the next page. Regardless, it took her a while to find the accident; it occurred on Friday, November 18 at a quarter of eight in the evening - close to the same time. Looking through the 1875 log book, she found the accident occurred in the same way, at the same time, on December 21. At this point, she debated on whether to go to the *Messenger* office, or to retrieve the investigation file. She chose the latter.

Unlike the report for Deputy Hiram Lewis, these cases were not on the list of the unsolved. The 1875 incident took place while Sheriff Tate's grandfather, Charles Tate Jr., was sheriff. The victim was the commissioner of sanitation – presumed drunk, struck by the evening express, it happened in November, and he had no reason for being in that part of the county. The inquest ruled that it was an accident. The 1881 report stated that the victim “was run over while on the center span of the Northeast River Bridge, apparently, passed out from drinking, a good distance from his home, and there was no ascertainable purpose as to why he attempted to cross to the north side of the river.” He was a judge!

A judge? Stumbling around drunk in the sparsely populated north end of the county seemed out of character for a man of his



position. Even so, the investigation did not uncover any evidence of foul play. Ethel returned the reports to their cabinet. Now, she was off to the *Messenger*. On her way out, she encountered Sheriff Tate.

“I knew it! Before you say a word, let me tell you about the other accidents on that bridge – all big men in the town. What do you want me to do?” Tate, taken by surprise, said,

“Do you think you are onto something?” She said,

“You tell me. Somebody invited them out there for a liquor party, and then put them out on the tracks? That sounds possible to me.”

“Well, Ethel, that's exactly what daddy said this morning.”

“You mean you didn't go home for your Saturday afternoon nap? Good Lord, I better get out of here!”

“Where are you going?”

“Over to the *Messenger*.”

Ethel spent the entire afternoon – past dark – in the archives of the newspaper, stopping periodically to step outside to contemplate her findings over a chocolate bar. Understandably, the reporters were curious. She told them that her research was associated with the interminable investigation into the persons who had gone missing over the years. Thus, having seen the sheriff come up empty handed time and again with this obsession, the newspaper men judged her research project as less interesting than the stories they were writing for the evening edition. So, they left her alone.

Unlike the brief article concerning the untimely demise of Deputy Lewis, the collisions between drunken bigwigs and locomotives were written in sensational prose, but they varied little in the particulars. The same questions came to the fore; no rational answers were given. Ethel then looked at the editorial pages during the period of these deaths so she might assess what the public thought about the deceased. Conspicuously absent was excessive eulogizing. Not too many words were expended in praise or grief, merely a dry description of their business activities and offices they

held - nothing more. By contrast, when other notables about town died, the editor indulged his muses. Clearly, the town cared little for the victims of the bridge accidents. Ethel turned her attention to one victim, Judge Richard Coats. She suspected that the man, by the nature of his profession, had enemies.

Paging through issues, she found a letter to the editor following the death of Judge Coats, penned under an obvious pseudonym “Tim Turpentine”. The writer implored the public to pressure the governor to call for a retrial of three young men convicted of murder. ‘On the weight of the testimony of one eyewitness, the three were sentenced to death’; the supposed ringleader had his appointment with the hangman at the end of the month. This excited Ethel’s interest. Quickly, she glanced through the month’s issues looking for further mention of the case. The victim, she discovered, was a teacher in the common school who was outspoken about abolishing child labor – a particularly sore topic for the mill operators. One evening in early 1881, the three hoodlums set upon him while he was walking home from an evening church service. They took him to the Horse Pond District, and beat him mercilessly in the open lot between Dibble’s Livery and the railroad cut. Zeb, older brother of Belfort Dibble, surprised the ruffians, and they fled – he recognized them, too. Immediately, he placed the barely conscious man in his buckboard and race to County Hospital. Once there, the teacher eventually died of internal injuries. He lived long enough to describe his assailants. Ethel knew the Dibble family. She went to school with Elwood and Carson. Their father Belfort owned the livery, now a garage. The boys were nice, but they had a propensity for bumbling into messes. Their mother, Margie, was taciturn and a bit neurotic.

The Monday, November 28, 1881, edition of the *Messenger* contained a lurid account of the execution of the instigator of the attack. The old county jail, located a block from the town square, had a large walled yard behind the building. It was spacious enough to hold a thousand spectators. In the center of the second story porch at the rear of the old brick jail was an opening that led to the central hallway of the floor. This is where the trapdoor was located. Above, there was an iron hook attached underneath the deck of the third story balcony for securing the noose. During an execution, the

prisoner was escorted from his cell on the second floor, out the door, and onto the porch. After the sentence was read, and the condemned said his last words, the pins preventing the trap door from opening were disengaged. The hangman awaited his signal from the sheriff to pull the lever. After the condemned fell the prescribed length, the physician employed by the county climbed a step ladder to verify when the prisoner expired. The undertaker was at hand to load the body into a coffin. The reporter writing the story included these particulars. Ethel was aghast by what she read next.

The superintendent of the jail handed out a thousand tickets – specially printed for the occasion – at the gate opening to the courtyard. Though they were not sold, rather given out, the article stated the crowd that had come to watch stretched two blocks. Ethel found the thought nauseating that people would flock to see another person die. She also read that the drop did not break the young man’s neck. It took seven minutes before the doctor pronounced him dead. Curiously, he was dressed in his Sunday best, ready to be taken to the cemetery. That is exactly what happened next – no wake or church service – just a few words from a minister. The burial took place in Potters Field. Eventually, executions were taken out of the hands of county officials, and cloaked behind the walls of the state prison.

After reading more issues, she discovered that the governor denied the petition for a retrial; the other two murderers were executed on consecutive Saturdays in January, 1882. The respective accounts of their deaths were similar to the first, though both were dispatched more efficiently. Ethel was curious about Zeb Dibble. Though she had heard her fair share of stories about the long-suffering Belfort Dibble and his troublesome boys – and personal experiences with Elwood – this is the first time she ever heard of Zeb. It was late, but Ethel could not resist returning to the office to resume the in the report.

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“Sheriff Tate, what are you still doing here? Don’t you think my sister is waiting for you?”

“No, Ethel; she is waiting for you. She wants you to come for supper. I was over at the *Messenger* office, and they said you went home. When I didn’t find you there, I figured right that you came back here. So, turn around, get back into your fancy automobile, and let’s eat. Aren’t you about ready to fall over?”

*February 20, 1922.* Sheriff Tate told Ethel that Zeb Dibble had gone missing forty years ago. His family never heard from him again. He was on the long list of missing persons. If he were still living, he would be about sixty – a few years older than Belfort. Tate continued by saying,

“The Dibbles are a secretive lot. Deep down, I know that they are mixed up in something. The boys cavorted with crazy Lucille Calder. Remember that big mess she left us? Now, I am not saying those rascals take to anything of a violent nature. It is not in them. Nevertheless, they know about everything that goes on in the Horse Pond District. I’m sure of it.” Ethel said,

“Why not let me do some snooping?”

“No!”

“You know I can do a better job! I’m clever, sneaky, and turning out to be one humdinger of a liar – all in the service of justice... thanks to you. It is not everybody that puts their heart into it like me! I want to snoop!” Tate exhaled, and said,

“I can tell. Like Saturday: instead of taking your day off, you were here. Now, I promised your sister that nothing was going to happen to you; so, I will not have you snooping about on your own – particularly, not that Mrs. Paschal nonsense you were up to before I hired you.”

“Who is Mrs. Paschal?”

“A lady detective from a book... Ask my mother for it when you decide to take a day off. When the need presents itself, you and your friend Deputy Wilkes sit down and work up a plan for this ‘snooping’. After that, you tell me exactly what is cooking in that brain of yours. Don’t you dare do anything without letting me know the whole of it; and certainly, not alone – that goes for the both of

you! Seeing that I've said my piece, Deputy Fales is going to show you everything there is to know about shotguns."

"What?"

"It's easy; just hold it firm so you don't break your shoulder. After you're done, get back to what you were doing. It sounds like you're onto something.

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Returning from lunch with ringing ears and a sore shoulder, Ethel went looking for the case against the three boys that murdered the teacher. She discovered they worked for the Guthrie Mill, the textile manufactory located east of town on the streetcar line. They were the very sort that the teacher was trying to help. None of them offered a statement. A local party boss named Archie McIntire hired an attorney to represent them. Ethel decided to pay a visit to the courthouse to examine the minutes of the case. She discovered that the trial lasted an afternoon. The attorney for the defense entered a plea of not guilty. The prosecutor called Zeb Dibble, the doctors from County Hospital, and town constables that responded to the crime. The defense attorney cross examined the witnesses. The boys refused to offer any testimony in their own defense. Without much deliberation, the jury found them guilty of murder.

During sentencing, the defense called the parents of the boys to the stand. Their appeals appeared somewhat indifferent, but the fathers of the two older boys rambled on about outside agitators placing their jobs at risk with foolish talk about labor reform. One went so far as to proclaim all men *were not* created equal, so their survival hinged on doing the bidding of their betters. It was a hereditary obligation "to be loyal and serve – even sacrifice your own – to the man who puts bread on your table." Ethel found the whole argument absurd and disturbing. Curiously, she had the distinct feeling it was paraphrased from something she read... or likely, heard."

The mother of the youngest, however, was passionate in her efforts to save her son. Her name was Emily Rosemann. In a fit of

pleading she let slip that her son and Archie McIntire had a common father, Alfred “Little Polk” McIntire. Perhaps, she thought political connections might sway the judge. It didn’t; all three boys were sentenced to death. When it was pronounced, their response was indifference.

*February 22, 1922.* Ethel discovered that both Archie and Alfred “Little Polk” McIntire died many years ago. Archie, rather Archibald Murphey McIntire, rose to prominence in the Legislature. He even had a highway bridge named after him. The high point of his career was a near-successful run for Congress. After that, he remained an important figure in state politics until his death from pneumonia in 1918. His father died 1888 from a spreading infection he contracted from a fishhook. Ironically, he survived several life threatening wounds during the Civil War, only to die from a mere puncture. Emily Rosemann, however, was alive. The 77-year-old ran a modest clapboard store on the far north side of town beyond the upper yards of the depot, and her living quarters were across the street in a tenement for railroad workers.

Sheriff Tate gave Ethel permission to speak with her on the condition that Deputy Wilkes went with her. After a pleasant few moments of chitchat, Ethel asked her about Alfred McIntire. Hesitantly, she said,

“After I was dismissed from the mill, “Little Polk” gave me some money. Then, I purchased this store and went into business for myself.”

She went on to say that she never married, and was better off because of it. Her mood darkened when the conversation turned to her son Rupert.

“My boy should have been let off easy. He didn’t know what he was doing, just following along with the older ones. It was spite, I tell you. Judge Coats wanted the mill owners to know that they weren’t running things after all. They fixed his wagon! I guess I can say this since everybody is dead now and old folks like me can see the end around the corner... we don’t care. “Little Polk” knew all about the murder of Judge Coats; his boy, Archie, participated in the

deed. I don't know who else was in on it, but "Little Polk" was awfully proud that his boy was up to the job. To tell you the truth, that judge was a baby killer, if you ask me. As for my boy, he took it like a man. He said, 'I have nothing more to say. Go ahead, and drop me.' I'm sure glad the hangman got it right that time. The first one strangled."

Ethel didn't know how to respond. She smiled, thanked Emily, and left. Deputy Wilkes followed her. Once in the car, she said,

"There is something about that conversation that strikes me as... I don't know... it seemed like something out of a savage age."

"Savage age? During the 1880s, this town made great strides! That was when your grandfather was assistant superintendent of the railroad. After the 'Great Fire' destroyed this whole ward, he was in charge of rebuilding the station, warehouses, shops, everything! – Better than it ever was! Then, Gilridge was poised for prosperity."

"Granddaddy was interim superintendent during that time, and when the fire struck. After all that good work, they selected somebody else for superintendent. Never mind; progress and prosperity doesn't change who we are."

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When Ethel and Deputy Wilkes told Sheriff Tate what they learned from Emily Rosemann, he became more interested in the death of Judge Coats.

"It sounds like revenge is the motive. Now, we cannot put much weight in what she said since the two men are not around to answer for it... much less, considering it could have been mere big-talk to cheer the lady. But on the chance there is some truth in it, some who were involved might still be alive. Here is what I want you to do: pay a visit to the whole Diddle clan. Tell them something has come to light – you can't say what – that has caused me to reopen my investigation into the disappearance of Zeb. After that, question them about that old murder case, those fellows that were hanged, and figure out a way of working something in about Carter Lewis.

Watch carefully how it works on them – let me know. Start with Belfort and Margie.

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Approaching Belfort first at his garage, they initially found him unwilling to discuss his long-lost brother. After resisting Ethel's insistent questions for about a half-hour, he said,

"I don't think he is dead. Zeb had the good sense to get out of here while he could. While those boys that killed the teacher appeared to have acted on their own, certain folks were pleased about it. Word has it that they tangled with the judge, but he wouldn't budge. Then, it became a fight to the death. After the judge had his accident, they took their case to the governor. He turned them down; they made sure he didn't get any votes from this county the next time around. Well, Zeb made off. I can't say for sure; but deep down, I know it. There are those that disappeared, and you know that they're dead – not him. It doesn't matter that we never heard from him again. If he tried, the ones that run things have a long memory. That's all I'm going to say. Be careful, young lady."

Ethel and Wilkes went to the Calder & Dibble Ironworks to talk with the boys. On entering the building, Elwood turned the Carson and said,

"Oh, hell! Would you look at that? It's Ethel Rouse and the law. Keep quiet and let me take care of this. That girl can talk you into places that you don't want to be before you know it. Mean, too!" As they approached, he said aloud, "Deputy and Miss Ethel, what can we do for you today?" Wilkes replied,

"Actually, we are both deputies. You might be surprised to hear it, but Deputy Rouse is the best shot we have in the department – a regular Annie Oakley!" Carson said, much to Elwood's irritation,

"She was a tiny thing, that girl! Annie Oakley, that's who I'm talking about..." Elwood interjected,

"I don't doubt it. I went to school with Deputy Rouse. Even though on looks you can't tell her from Liz, there's never been a



smarter, more conniving, meaner tomboy put on this Earth – and that is a compliment.” Ethel frowned, and said,

“I’m not mean... unless somebody provokes me, and you liked to do it. Anyway, that was when we were kids. You liked me a whole lot better when we were older.”

“I liked you a whole lot, period. You sure knew how to dance – nonstop, from the moment the band started playing until they shut the doors. You’d keep tapping away until Liz said it was time to go home - too much energy for me. Now, look at you... it figures. Well, I don’t suppose you came here to talk about the old days. Have you come to haul us in?” She said,

“Sheriff Tate would like that, but we think differently. You’re trying to run an honest business, and everybody knows that. From the looks of things, it is easy to see that there is plenty of work. We’re here about your Uncle Zeb. Your daddy thinks he is still alive, but is afraid to come home.” Elwood motioned for Ethel and Deputy Wilkes to follow him outside behind the building. Once there, he said,

“Ethel, I am going to tell you this because I like you; and maybe, I like your deputy friend, too. The only thing keeping you two from an unmarked grave right now is that if anything happens to you, Sheriff Tate will bring in all sorts of lawmen – government men, no doubt – and they’ll turn this county upside down looking for you. He did it once, and you remember what happened. Folks in this part of town ended up dead! Right now, he raids a speakeasy now and then; it is all small catches. The ‘gray hoods’ are above it all – and they’re everywhere. I doubt that you will ever catch one alive. Knowing you, sooner or later... then, they’ll be ready for you. They might even set you up like they did to Lucille. I don’t want to see that happen. That’s what they did! I loved that girl! We were making plans. I know a few things – all of us know something – but we want to stay alive. If Uncle Zeb is above ground – you didn’t hear it from us. That’s all that I am going to say.” Ethel put her fists on her hips, gave Elwood her most exasperated frown, and began tapping her foot. “Alright then, it’s your neck... and maybe, ‘Deputy Friend’...

he's first mate on a ship. When it happens to be in port, he does come off. After they hanged that last boy, the men came after him. They gave Pa a beating! Zeb signed on with the first ship ready to pull anchor. He's spent most of his life at sea. This is what I'm going to do, Sweet Pea. The next time the ship is in port, I'll try to get onboard to have a talk with him. Nobody will know the wiser since we're in the business fixing boilers, and the like. If he wants to talk to you, I'll set up something. In the meanwhile, arrest some bootleggers, or whatever you do. Just don't keep showing up here! That ship is not due back anytime soon.

*March 26, 1922.* Sheriff Tate and Dr. Hugh Wilson, county coroner, arrived at the scene of the "accident" at about half past two in the morning. Making it onto the bridge, led by the conductor, they came to the place where the mashed remains of a man rested. His whole lower section was intact, but parts of his insides were strewn about. Tate told Wilson,

"Though it is hard to tell, I wouldn't be surprised if that wasn't Carter Lewis – another one of the Lewis clan meets his end with a train. God Almighty; what a mess! Do you think we can get this done the right way without holding up the railroad?" Wilson answered,

"You know we have to check under that locomotive and the cars for missing bits of him. That is going to take a while. First, we have to gather up what is on the bridge." Turning to the conductor, he said, "Fancy meeting you here, Mr. Rouse. When did you start running the mail train?"

"Oh, a week ago; I'm taking over for the regular fellow. It seems like your daddy and I were doing this exact same thing a few years past. At least, this one is together... somewhat. Say, how's my daughter working out for you?"

"I couldn't have married a better lady. Best there is, without a doubt."

"Not her; the feisty one."

"Oh, I keep her busy... very busy. When is the next train?" He said,

"A freight comes through in half-an-hour. After that, there is nothing until the morning express. The superintendent is sending out some men, and the company lawyer - I think you know him. As for this train, we have some awfully upset passengers. Do you think you could poke around under it first, and then let me send it on. If you miss one of his parts, it is a sure thing you can have a better look under the engine when we have it in the shops. Whatever gets decided, I can tell you the mail car is going to town... the company has to fulfill the contract, you know." Wilson said,

"It is important that we have all of him, if that is possible."

Coroner Wilson and his assistant set about their work without further discussion. When the men from the railroad arrived, the work eventually proceeded in a more or less harmonious coexistence with the timetable.

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While mulling over her plans for Sunday, Sheriff Tate interrupted Ethel's breakfast to hand her a copy of the *Messenger* while on his way home for a nap. He wanted her at the office on Monday at seven o'clock sharp. After scolding him for pounding on her door before she had her coffee, Ethel confirmed that she would arrive promptly. On leaving, the sheriff conveyed her father's regards, adding, "he said 'When is she going to get around to marrying that professor fellow?' and 'If you plan on bringing her out here, tell her to wear some old shoes.'" Later that morning, she flopped on the couch and carefully read the newspaper account of the train accident.

"At around two o'clock Saturday morning, the early mail train roared onto the Northeast River Bridge and over the body of Carter Lewis, a local hardware store owner. As of late, Mr. Lewis was under investigation for his suspected involvement with a speakeasy run by Mrs. Mattie Maxton. Recalling the death of Carter's uncle, Hiram Lewis, once a deputy sheriff of this county, killed in similar fashion at the same location, Sheriff George Tate said he suspects foul play."

Ethel, who had been taken off her research over the last month to help with speakeasy raids, suddenly found herself back in the records room... and the courthouse... and the *Messenger* office. This would certainly be the perfect time to hear from Elwood.

*May 9, 1922.* Black Lake was located in the middle of a pine forest out of town, accessible by a dirt road. The lake was far from picturesque: stagnant and smelly, usually covered with a thick mat of algae during the warm months. Trees surrounding the lake, and in the shallows, were draped with Spanish moss. In the daylight, it was a spooky place. Night gave free reign to the visitor's imagination, conjuring up unseen horrors. It was certainly a place to scare the wits out of a person. Sheriff Tate stopped the car at the edge of the water, turned off the engine, and waited silently for several long minutes. Ethel turned around to Elwood and said,

"Where is he, Elwood?"

"He'll be here. Wait for the sound – it will be a bosun's whistle. When you hear it, Sheriff, give one short blast from the whistle I gave you. That way, he'll know it's me. Afterwards, he'll come out from the trees." The three stepped outside the car. Ethel reached into her pocket, and removed her handcuffs. Presenting them before Elwood in open position, she said,

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, time for play-acting. Go ahead, Sweet Pea; put those handcuffs on me." Ethel snapped closed one of the cuffs around his wrist and said in a contrive tone,

"You're under arrest. I'm sorry, Elwood." With a slight chuckle, he said,

"No, you're not." She laughed.

"Not that way, behind your back. You're a dangerous criminal. Turn around; let me have that other hand!" Elwood placed his hands behind his back, and Ethel locked the second cuff around his other wrist.

"See, Sheriff, I told you she had a mean streak." Tate said,

“You had better not say that just yet. Her cuffs are old style and I don’t have a key for them. What do you say, Ethel?”

“Let me think about it on the way back. Elwood has a bad habit of telling half the truth. I’m sure he will get around to the rest after waiting in the station for a couple of hours. Don’t worry, I have the rest of the night to chat; and just so he knows, as a rule, the handcuffs stay on until we put him in a cell, or let him go.” Elwood gave a slight laugh and said,

“Didn’t I say I liked you a whole lot?” Placing her hand on his upper arm, she replied,

“All the more that we should spend time together.” Tate added jokingly,

“Ethel, I believe you have a reason for putting him under arrest: reasonable suspicion for the time being will do. What do you say, Elwood? You’re in her custody. She can interrogate you. Come to think about it, Ethel, after we’re done, I can leave you out here and take a long drive around the neighborhood so you can rough him up a little.” At that moment, the high, shrill, sound of a bosun’s whistle echoed over the lake. Sheriff Tate reported back with a brief blast from his. In the woods fronting the opposite side of the lake, the dim light of a kerosene lamp became visible. The light traced the perimeter of the water. When in a short distance of the sheriff’s automobile, the man holding the lantern became visible. Then, he sat down on a fallen tree and extinguished his light. Sheriff Tate advanced toward the man, follow by Ethel holding Elwood’s arm. The only light illuminating the scene was the moon, at transit, and almost full. Elwood said,

“Uncle Zeb, I would like to introduce you to Sheriff George Tate and Deputy Ethel Rouse. They followed me out and place me under arrest. I’ve been charged with suspicion of withholding information about a crime.” Irritated, Zeb said,

“So, you went ahead with that damn fool idea. I only agreed to come out here to talk you out of it. Now, you’re going to jail. So, they know about the ‘gray hoods?’” Ethel said,

“People have been talking about those ‘gray hoods’ since Reconstruction; they’re blamed for all sorts of things. Not one has ever been caught. The sheriff tends to think their boogie men. There was another ‘accident on the Northeast River Bridge a few weeks back – just like Judge Coats. A phantom didn’t do it.” Jeb turned to Elwood and asked,

“Did you tell them what those men did to Belfort?”

“I sure did, and a few things more. So, they’re going to take me in; I’m going to give them a sworn statement – every bit of it. I don’t have any choice if I want to save my family, and stay out of jail. Somebody has to stand up. That is, unless you tell the sheriff what you know, and where you’ve been. Our troubles started when the sheriff sent this lady deputy asking about you. Don’t let looks deceive you; she is as mean as they come!” Ethel interjected,

“I hope they put this rascal away, no matter what.” Zeb said,

“Alright boy! Be careful what you say, Elwood! You don’t want to be running away the rest of your life. They have friends in other places.” He said,

“So, tell them where you’ve been!”

“All these years, I’ve been at sea; usually, on freighters. It has been about ten years with this one, so I’ve worked up to first mate. About every few months, the ship returns here. We unload at the wharves near the lower yards of the railroad. Sometimes, I come into town, but most of the time I stay aboard. When walking the streets, it is only for a couple hours; never in the daylight. I’ve been out to sea since 1882. It was the easiest way to slip out of sight without leaving a trail. Forty years later, I reckon the ‘gray hoods’ have forgotten about me; and sure enough, age has disguised me to a degree. Be that as it may, I am old enough to see the end of life. Spending another decade at sea hiding from a pack of scoundrels might not be worth it anymore. What am I saving myself for? So, here is my piece: those boys were told to beat that loose-tongued teacher. It wasn’t what it seemed to be. A few days before, the ‘gray hoods’ paid a visit, warning the teacher to get out of town. He told me that while I was taking him to County Hospital. Those boys – all

three of them! – denied they had been hired. The prosecutor offered each one the chance to escape the rope if he would name who put them up to it. The case went to trial, and those lads still kept quiet. You know, the first hanging was botched! The other two read about it in the paper, so you would think it might have put a scare into them. Not so! The second boy took the rope. The mill workers were there to see him off. They cheered when he was brought out! After it was done, they followed behind the wagon to Potters Field. Finally, when it came to the last one – he was the youngest – he was about to say something when he was up there, but stopped short. What do you suppose kept them from saving their own necks? I'll tell you! Reprisals! Whether you are for the 'gray hoods' or against them, you and every member of your family is a hostage. I testified; your daddy kept me out of sight, before and after the trial. Then, to keep Belfort and the rest of our family safe, I had to disappear." Ethel asked,

"That, we expected; is there anything more?"

"All the problems that befell the family are my fault. In 1909, I figured it was safe to poke around town in the daytime when my ship came in. One day, I was walking out near the depot, when a man stuck a pistol in the small of my back. He wasn't wearing a hood. This gentleman said, "Good to see you back, Zeb Dibble. Let's take a walk down to River Street." Halfway down to the Northside docks, he had me walk through the alleyway to this tenement. Once inside, he told me that he was the executioner for those he called 'Kinsfolk'; and if I didn't cooperate with him, Belfort's little ones would pay for my betrayal. I agreed to do what he said. Then, he told me that since the three boys were hanged because of me, I had to hang, too. He had a noose and chair already set up for me. But instead of getting on with it, he told me to sit down in the chair, and drink a couple drams of whiskey from his flask. Seeing that it was going to be my last drink, I took him up on it. About fifteen or twenty minutes later, I passed out. When I came out of it, it was dark. This fellow was on his knees, holding his head; not unconscious, but from the looks of things, next to it. I figure the Lord must have plans for me. I made it back to the ship, and stayed out of town for the next five or six years." Tate asked,

“What was the name of your ship back then?”

“It was the *Parthenia*... This is all of it, so now you know. Bring somebody onboard to take all this down, and I’ll sign it. If you can keep this boy from doing something stupid, I would appreciate it. You know, if you are set on ruining your life, most of the damage is done when you are young. Now, I’m going back.”

Zeb lit his lamp, and followed the edge of the lake back to its opposite end. Then, his light went out. Without saying a word, Sheriff Tate started cranking his car. Ethel said,

“Get in, Elwood.”

“Can you take the cuffs off now?” With a slight laugh, she said,

“Of course not; you’re under arrest.” After that, she roughly pushed him into the rear seat of the car. “Move over, Elwood, I think I want to sit beside you. The sheriff is going to take us the long way back to town.” Flabbergasted, Elwood said,

“This is only supposed to be play-acting! It was all my idea!” Sheriff Tate turned around and said,

“We know it was your idea. You wanted our visitor to think we arrested you. Very good play-acting, I must say. Similarly, I believe you had another purpose for being arrested, even though you’re keeping it to yourself; so, we are obliging - reasonable suspicion... of ‘withholding information.’ Your own words, remember? ‘They’re going to take me in; I’m going to give them a sworn statement – every bit of it...’ ‘Somebody has to stand up.’ Don’t fret, Elwood; after you sign the statement, you’ll feel proud that you stood up... and still have a great excuse to tell your daddy, too.” With a sly chuckle, Ethel said,

“You are going to spend plenty of time in those cuffs because I am not going to open them until it is impossible to keep you locked up a second longer. They’re staying on, so get used to it.”

“You’re one mean girl.”



“No, Elwood! Forget the mean and mischievous part of me that enjoys it. You are under arrest. I like you a lot, too. Reasonable suspicion, wouldn’t you say?”

On the drive back from Black Lake, Ethel scolded Elwood for a lifetime of missteps and roguery while at the same time praising him for his industry and skills. It was an unrelenting and carefully worded, application of pressure of the feminine variety, all contrived to reduce him to the emotional equivalent of a remorseful little boy. This was a powerful emotional cocktail! Elwood felt embarrassment at finding himself in the unthinkable position of having been arrested by his childhood sweetheart. By his own design, she made him absolutely helpless. Maybe, she had it in for him all along? He was wrong... it was all still playacting.

*May 12, 1922.* It didn’t take Ethel long to discover when the freighter *Parthenia* was in Gilridge during the year 1909. The records of the harbormaster indicated that it took on cargo at the railroad wharves in April and September; each time the ship stayed in port about four days. On visiting Coroner Wilson’s office, she found that the only death that he investigated during those two periods of time was that of Alvin Littlefield. His body was found on the ground outside the rear entrance to the railroad’s general administration building on River Street in the early morning of September 16, 1909. Dr. Wilson, then new to his work, determined that the man died of a stroke. The state of the body was consistent with death having occurred the previous day. Also, from grime on his clothing, it was likely he struggled on a dirty floor before stumbling into the street. In his report, Wilson stated that the evidence suggested that death finally came outside of the railroad headquarters before midnight. When Ethel returned to the office, she discussed her findings with Sheriff Tate.

“Sir, what would you say if I told you that Alvin Littlefield was likely the man that tried to kill Zeb Dibble?”

“Norton Littlefield’s daddy; well, that makes things interesting. Can you prove it?”

“Maybe, if we had a photograph of the chap to show Zeb?”

“That is easy enough. His portrait is hanging in the entrance to the Mercantile Bank of Gilridge.”

“We are out of our waters. Am I correct?”

“Yes, Ethel; it seems like we keep piling up evidence against the dead – enough to stir up trouble with the living. Let’s file all of it away – in my safe! – until we have a suspect in the death of Carter Lewis. Until then, don’t breathe a word. I suppose the same applies for Elwood. But tell him, I was proud of him for standing up.”

“Yes, me, too... I must say, he is an awfully good actor.”

“Seeing that the week is done, I do not want to see you until Monday morning – and no snooping! When I finally get a chance to sit down with Liz, my mind needs to be clear of worrying about how much trouble you can dig up.”

## THE WOMAN FROM KERES ISLAND

*Prologue.* Fish guts! The sensation of yanking out the entrails of poor, dead things with her fingers was inscribed on her spirit. So, too, was the smell: forever, the stench tainted her hands and face. No matter how frequently she bathed and perfumed, the scent remained in her nostrils – rather, her mind. Self-consciously, she stood aside from the rest of the mourners during the graveside service. Yet, she was thoroughly hardened against the sting of final goodbyes. The youthful delusions about her rightful destiny dissolved completely.

Claudia's experience on Keres Island taught her that a person could be devalued to such a degree that they became lost – completely lost – in the fulfillment of a mindless, repetitive task. The world outside the sheltering confines of the familiar was sordid and dangerous. Without family or friends, the individual of little means was merely an anonymous member of the herd whose presence meant nothing. There would always be new recruits to take the place of the fallen – even more so, at the bottom – so it seemed. Now, she knew it was far worse: it was no longer possible to believe terrible things happened for a reason. Whether they were good or evil, rich or poor, something could occur out of nowhere, pulling down the soul of anybody.

*September 14, 1923.* By summer's end, the Calder & Dibble Ironworks was making a handsome profit refitting ships. With their partner Lucille Calder committed to the state hospital for the insane, the Dibble brothers, Elwood and Carson, turn their efforts towards restoring the dry dock and training a dozen men to attend to the ever growing demand for the company's services. Behind the scenes, their silent partner, the cold and efficient Janice Littlefield, maintained a tight reign over finances. She had power of attorney over Lucille's estate, but never associated with the Dibbles directly. This suited the brothers fine. Aside from their disdain for her condescending mannerisms, Janice knew nothing of the nature of their craft, nor

was she inclined to learn. As long as the operation maintained a profit, she was satisfied to remain aloof.

This evening, after their help went home for the evening, Elwood and Carson set to rewiring the lights that ran from the rear of the ironworks out to the end of the pier behind the building. It was a tedious job since all of the old wire and fixtures needed to be replaced. Regardless, they had to keep at least a few lights shining at all times so vessels plying the river by night would not crash into the pilings. At about ten o'clock in the evening, the brothers took a break from their work and sat down on the deck at the end of the pier. The river was still, and the Southside docks were quiet. The moon set about an hour earlier. When Lucille Calder was helping the boys restart the business, she enjoyed sitting at the end of the pier by herself, smoking cigarettes. Elwood, in particular, liked her. Walking out on the pier reminded him of the strange, raven haired woman who labored under the tyranny of her mother-in-law, Ida Huffman. He knew that Lucille wasn't as crazy as everybody thought. Elwood's musings were interrupted when Carson whispered,

"Do you hear that? It sounds like a gasoline motor – a little one, coming from the left. I don't see a light. Do you?"

"Bootleggers, if you ask me. Turn off the lights."

The sound of the motor gradually grew louder, and then suddenly stopped. The boys remained absolutely still. A moment passed; then they could hear the sound of persons moving about inside the boat. It stopped in the middle of the river, directly in front of the pier. Carson switched on his flashlight, directing the beam at the craft just in time to see two men in hoods dumping a large sack attached to something overboard. He immediately switched off the light. Terrified, the boys froze, afraid to take a breath, until... the revving of the motor, followed by the sound of the boat racing away. When it seemed like it was a safe distance upriver, Carson turn on his flashlight and started scanning the surface of the water. After a moment, the white sack popped up to the surface. Carson gasped,

"Good Lord Almighty!"

Without hesitation, Elwood dived off the pier. Carson followed him, still holding his flashlight.

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The woman was alive, but the boys could not revive her. Fearing she might slip away, they enlisted the aid of their mother, Margie. On arriving at the ironworks, she told them,

“Trouble finds you two, doesn’t it? What makes you think somebody will not be coming for you after the word gets out? Oh, it will get out.”

“We’ll take her off somewhere so she can escape. If the ‘gray hoods’ are after her, she is not going to hang around to tell stories to the sheriff.”

“Shut up, Carson! I’ll take care of this myself.”

Inside the ironworks, Margie washed the unconscious woman several times over with soap and water. Having once revived in similar fashion a neighborhood boy who consumed an overdose of laudanum, it was the only remedy that came to mind. Roughly scrubbed and hosed down with cold water, the woman occasionally opened her lids, rolled her eyes briefly, and slumped over in a heap. After she was dressed and placed under the covers on the old cot in the back office, Margie brewed a pot of strong coffee for her. During this treatment, the boys were commanded to go outside. While waiting, Carson remarked,

“Pretty thing, isn’t she... I wonder what she did...” Looking upward to the starry sky, Elwood muttered,

“Don’t ask me. Let’s just hope she pulls through. All of us will be in deep trouble if that girl dies.”

If they were anybody but Dibbles, the victim would have been on her way to the doctor sometime past, but they were raised in the Horse Pond District, the vice-ridden neighborhood situated a few blocks east of the railroad depot. There, secrecy was a way of life – people disappeared if they talked. Margie had learned the hard way at seventeen when she threw a handful of lard in the face of a street

boss. Before dark the same day, he returned with some friends, and the thugs took her into an alley where the neighbors could see them beat her with a buggy whip. A handsome woman in her early forties, her back, arms, and one side of her neck bore the scars of that brutal late summer afternoon. The drugged woman would hopefully get better; but if things turned out for the worse, Margie planned to slip out the back way, and act like nothing happened. Yet, color returned to the face of the poor lass and her breathing improved. Full recovery would take much longer. Margie dutifully attended her, as the brothers planned her escape.

*September 15, 1923.* Shortly before sunrise, the woman in the back office of the ironworks opened her eyes. What followed was a frightful night of tortuous distress – a pounding headache, racing heart, shortness of breath, nausea, and muscle cramps. Finally, the worse subsided. The lady was able to hold down several cups of strong coffee and a handful of soda crackers. When dawn came, she was able to rest comfortably. Margie learned that her name was Claudia McMillan, mill worker, and the daughter of a Piedmont farmer. Her last recollection was walking home after her shift Friday afternoon feeling lightheaded. Without prolonged observation, the worldly Margie surmised that Claudia was a trusting, naïve innocent – and perhaps more harshly, a fool – that bumped into a predicament. Her pliability and vacuous gaze also suggested to Mrs. Dibble that it would be a while before she would be fit to make her escape from Gilridge.

Before the workers started arriving at the ironworks, Margie took Claudia McMillan several miles south of town to a boathouse on the sound that her husband Belfort owned. It was located at the end of a dirt road through a dense stand of pines. Prior to leaving the ironworks, the boys rummaged through the cabinets for some provisions for Claudia. They found two tins of beef, a can of beans, soda crackers, and half of bag of ground coffee. Carson filled two gallon-jugs with water. The boathouse did not have electric power or a water pump. Its only purpose was for storing several Jon-boats that Belfort and his friends used for floundering. By the time Margie reached the boathouse, it was dawn. Claudia, still weak from the drugs, had difficulty standing. Margie, loaded down with necessities

and a heavy blanket, steadied Claudia as she brought her inside. The building had a table, two chairs, and a small wood stove, but nothing more in the way of furnishings. Claudia would have to doze wherever she could. When the sick girl asked about the circumstances surrounding her abduction, Margie said,

“My boys saved you from being drown in a sack like a sick cat. They couldn’t make out who did it, but this kind of thing happened before. It was a fellow named Pete – dead and stripped naked. I don’t know what you did, but it was enough to get them awfully upset.” Claudia, dumbfounded, said,

“This doesn’t make any sense to me.”

“Things happen if you say something to the wrong person. Then again, if a friend gets out of line, the ones running the game might make an example of you to keep her from going astray. It is how it works, girl. Nobody is safe – even the big shots! Come midnight, my boys are going to take you across the sound to the fishery on Keres Island. They’ll leave you with a widow named Mrs. Tyrrell. In the morning, she will take you out to the cannery supervisor. They are shorthanded, so likely they will take you on. You stay there! Don’t ever come back to this county! Don’t use your real name... and don’t make friends with anybody. They’ll sell you out for next to nothing. My guess that’s what happened to you in the first place: some fellow was sweet on you, and his girl didn’t like it. She made up something and passed it on to the men in the hoods. Let it be a lesson! Work, save your money; then, get lost... forget about everything!”

“There was a boy.” Margie muttered,

“It’s always a boy. Did he work at the mill?”

“No, he was a college boy.

“How did you meet a college boy?”

“Downtown, at the lunch counter – after that, every Friday, since May, he would be waiting for me outside the house where I

was boarding. We would go out for sandwiches, and then see the movie. He was nice... really nice..." Margie said,

"Too bad... It is best that you forget about him... for his sake. You're poison now. If the 'gray hoods' connect you two; they'll snatch him to get you, or kill the both of you outright! Keep your mouth shut, and don't think about him. Likely, he'll find somebody else in a week or two. Mill girls come and go – everybody knows that." Claudia sighed and said,

"I knew something would happen... While it lasted, I could think about better times. Now, everything is worse than when I started off from home. Papa was wrong about coming east. There's nothing here! As soon as I have the money, I'm heading back to the farm. It is all nothing, you know – this place." Margie took a change purse from her skirt pocket. She emptied its contents into Claudia's hand. She said,

"I suppose there is a few dollars in change there. You'll scrape up the rest in no time soon enough to get you back. Don't you dare tell anybody about my boys! They saved you! Now, I am afraid for them on your account! Just to let you know, my husband doesn't know anything about this. For his good, we keep certain matters secret. If those fellows snatch you up again, I'll take all the blame. Belfort and the boys were unawares... here me?" After assuring Margie that she would keep quiet about the scrape with death and her rescue, Claudia nibbled on a soda cracker before making her bed inside one of the boats.

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Elwood and Carson arrived at the boathouse shortly before midnight. Margie, who had been waiting for their arrival the entire day, was desperately deprived of sleep. Since Saturday, in the prolonged struggle to save Claudia, she napped periodically. During her stay at the boathouse, Margie managed to nod off briefly in the afternoon. All the while, Claudia slumbered inside the boat. By nightfall, she had to prepare a meager meal for her famished charge, which could barely keep it down; and then came the mosquitoes. When the boys arrived, Margie instructed them to deliver Claudia to



the widow without delay, and then return immediately. The distance across the sound to Keres Island was about a mile and a half. The water was calm that night, so rowing was easy as far as the ship channel fronting the shoreline. There, the water is deep, and the current trends southerly. The docks at the fishery in those days were located at Moon Point, directly across the sound from the boathouse. Mrs. Tyrrell lived a block south of the docks. Elwood and Carson escorted the girl with her sack of can goods to the widow's steps, and left after a brief exchange. Not wanting to attract attention, the boys kept silent the whole trip.

Claudia was resigned to placing her fate in the hands of strangers. There was no alternative: she had nothing more than the clothes on her back – they were second hand, too – and a few dollars in change. It is one thing to be alone and broke, but to be absolutely deprived of possessions and identity is tantamount to becoming a thing. She doubted whether Margie's explanation of her situation was the complete truth, but the boys seemed genuinely concerned for her safety; she could sense that they were taking a terrible risk. Determined to keep her word to Margie, she planned to make her way back to the Piedmont at the earliest moment.

*September 10, 1923.* In Gilridge, to be listed among those who had disappeared – like most places – one had to be missed. Unless a person of the working class had relatives and friends in the town, or had outstanding debts, nobody made a report. At the textile mill, employees that didn't show up after a few days were cut from the payroll. Boarders in tenements and flophouses, usually paying by the week, came and went; and when they left behind their possessions, it was a windfall for the proprietors. For several generations, the rural poor had flocked to the mills in search of steady income. Some thrived within its social order, while others carried on their roles of dependence within a new patriarchal culture. As with the mills in New England of earlier years, middling farmers shed their surplus females to these enterprises; and the taint of being a mill-girl doomed them to a life at the loom.

By Monday, there was only one person in Gilridge that was missing Claudia McMillan, and that was Maximillian Huffman. He had asked at her boarding house, and received the answer, "Nobody has seen her since payday. It's not unusual, son. They work a while in the mill to meet their most pressing needs, and then they're gone. You know, even a drunk can get work in the mill for a week or two." He was left to mope in solitude: his friends would not understand, nor would his Aunt Janice. Like his mother, the girl ran out on him – abandoned and failed him. Cynically, he was not surprised. Even so, it was a particularly cruel cut for Max. After returning to campus for his afternoon class, he waited outside the Science Building for Aunt Janice. When she emerged at a quarter of six; he greeted her warmly, hiding adeptly his feelings of hollowness. On the drive home, Janice told him that she had made reservations for dinner at the Southside Hotel. It would provide a more constrained setting to study his emotions. Secretly, she knew the boy was hurting – her driver spied on him from the moment he left the house. Though she was reluctant to relinquish her grip on Max, the time had come when Janice had to introduce him to a girl from the right sort of family. Apparently, his judgement in such matters was deficient; and she was not inclined to risk damaging the boy by making more of his lady friends disappear. Regardless, for the good of all concerned; the girl for Max needed to be ignorant of the family business. Janice figured the best match would be bookish, sweet, and pretty... but not too smart for her own good.

*October 6, 1923.* When Max came downstairs for breakfast, Janice announced that she had arranged for him to meet a young lady whom she thought was the right blend of intellect, charm, and beauty. She, too, was a student at the college; and after inquiring, Janice learned that she was from an old family. Her name was Veronica LeQuire. Max hardly felt like courting; nevertheless, he pretended to appear interested. She said,

"Your happiness is foremost in my mind. I hardly think of little else but you. Perhaps, Miss LeQuire might not be the right one; but on the other hand, you will not know until you become acquainted with her." After taking her hand, he said,

“I have never known you to be wrong about anything, Mother.”  
She smiled and said,

“Sweet boy, you should not call me that; though, it makes me happy. Nothing would please me more than had I borne you. Then, we would be part of each other. Since things didn't turn out that way, you will have to address me as Aunt Janice at all times. If you fall into doing otherwise, it might prove embarrassing in public. Now, let me say one more thing about Miss LeQuire. She strikes me as being a suitable match for you.”

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Claudia McMillan finished her shift at the cannery at six o'clock, and made her way over the sandy street to Mrs. Tyrrell's house. After handling fish for twelve hours, she smelled horrible; and as she was discovering, it was a difficult stench to scrub off. Even after bathing thoroughly, it lingered in her pores; and even more so, on her mind. Her job could not be more nauseating. On the line, she gutted the fish after it was scaled. To her side was a barrel in which she threw the innards. The work was repetitious, tiring, and somewhat dangerous. Her knife was extremely sharp, and she had seen other women – even the most skilled – slice their fingers. These cuts had a tendency to become infected; and as proof, the woman that operated the cooker lost an index finger after germs got into a tiny cut from the point of her blade. Claudia, who had thought her job at the textile mill dirty and hazardous now looked back on it with longing. The cannery seemed like some form of hell. The only thought that occupied her mind was earning enough money to go home. At seven dollars a week, it was going to take a while; half of it went to Mrs. Tyrrell for room and board.

Claudia had one complete changing of clothing that once belonged to Lucille, one oversized dress that Mrs. Tyrrell give her, and a pair of shoes from Margie that were too tight. She had no socks or stockings. Never in her life had she felt so desperate and worthless. Even the sharecroppers' daughters at home were better off, and that was not saying much. The women of the cannery were a joyless lot that rarely spoke; and when they did, it was short bursts

of fowl pronouncements. Unlike the mill where her companions chattered to pass the time, the attention of these women was consumed with not being cut or scalded in the primitive factory. A few men worked for the cannery, but it was outside, unloading the daily catch from the boats. Their work was more strenuous, but intermittent. Their pay was almost double! Periodically, one would roll in a cart of fish and promptly leave without exchanging a word, or even lifting his head. If he was seen talking to any of the women without permission, his pay would be docked a quarter for each infraction. In turn, it was not permissible for any of the women to encourage the men to speak with them. The supervisor, a woman, reported these offenses to the management - too many times, and then, the sociable lady was fired. As a rule, the word “lady” was used in a derogatory way; namely, to denote a female averse to hard, dirty work. Claudia imagined her experience akin to being a woman in prison; yet, with the important difference that she could walk away and starve. Even with the hard work she had performed on her parents’ farm, she never considered herself anything but a lady. Now, she was nothing.

Upon reaching the house, she went behind the building to wash herself in the stable where Mrs. Tyrrell kept the broken down nag she rode around the island. Before beginning, she filled two pails from the hand pump in the yard – the water had a salty smell. After scrubbing down and rinsing, she dried off with an old rag, and then changed into her “at home dress” as Mrs. Tyrrell called it – that is, the old lady’s oversized one. Her last task was to scrub her work dress and undergarments, and hang them up to dry. When she put them on in the morning, they were always damp. This evening, she had a pleasant surprise upon entering the house.

Elwood had come over to the island to deliver her a sack of clothing that Margie pulled from her closet – all rather drab. Despite all, Claudia now had a changing of clothing for every day of the week. For this, she was relieved. He also brought fragrant soap and powder, and bars of chocolate. He paid Mrs. Tyrrell for room and board, and then gave Claudia five dollars. After that, he took her outside to discuss plans for her escape. He said,

“We were expecting to hear something about you, but there was not a word. My brother Carson thinks we should slip you off the island on the weekend, and take you by the back way to the hills, or wherever you hail from. I agree, but our mama thinks we ought to wait another week. Just because the town didn’t miss you, doesn’t mean the ‘gray hoods’ aren’t looking.” She asked,

“Can you tell me a little more about these ‘gray hoods’? Don’t know how in the world I got them after me!”

“‘Gray hoods’ is what everybody calls them, but nobody knows who they are. They’ve been around as long as I know. Word has it that they started in Reconstruction times; but since the last war, they’ve shown up again - only at night. Some say, they have a lot of money. Why they want you is beyond me; but if you could have seen how much trouble they went through to fix your wagon, I’d say they wanted to make an example. Things like that keep people quiet.” Claudia said,

“Everything is so horrible here; I want to go home! Can you get word to my papa?”

“That’s not a good idea. If he comes down here, the sheriff might get curious, and then there will be a stink; and then, the ‘gray hoods’ will follow you back. People who stir things up in the county disappear. Nobody ever finds them. I don’t want that to happen... particularly, since mama helped you. Did you see those scars on her? When she was a girl, she was sassy one day; they beat her with a horsewhip. That’s what happens around here on a good day – marked her for life!” Startled, Claudia said,

“Alright... I believe you. I’ll wait... but, don’t make it too long. This is the worst place that I’ve ever been! I don’t think I’ll ever get that smell out of my nose!”

“Trust me, Sweet Pea; we’ll get you home. You’re here because it is the last place they would come looking. Nobody comes here except the boats and a preacher – and he doesn’t get much business. There is a general store, but don’t think about going in there. Mrs. Tyrrell is the only woman on the island that can get away with

roaming around on her own. There is one policeman, and he is apt to throw you in jail as soon as look at you. He'll charge you for being a street walker, and you can't do a thing about it. Trust me!"

"I trust you! You saved me, and I sure don't have any friends! Maybe, I never had any friends at all..."

*October 7, 1923.* If Norton Littlefield was allowed the luxury to pursue his innate inclinations, his occupation as a local bureaucrat would have satisfied his ambitions – he was cut out for it. As Director of County Cemeteries, he performed his job efficiently and with the utmost tact. He was courteous and disarmingly pleasant – perceived by many as benign and unremarkable. Nevertheless, he had an uncompromising loyalty to family, and an aversion to individuals who greedily pursued profit at the expense of honor. Albeit an accurate assessment of his underlying character, the nature of the family business – that is, the secret dealings – transformed his harmless attributes into malignancies. Be that as it may, the influence that forever mangled his life into a neurotic tangle was the older sister. Sisterly love, for Janice, was not much different than maternal love. Being six years older than Norton, she commenced her showering of sweet words and kisses when he was an infant. From his third year until Janice entered puberty, they shared the same room. Yet, after that, respite from her fawning companionship came rarely. Affection masked insatiable esurience: jealously, she crowded out interests and ambitions that attracted him if they could not be shared. When he became a young man, she engineered his ascension through the ranks of the inner circle of their ruthless kinsfolk. Qualifying him for inclusion in the clandestine band was his skill and ease of hiding the bodies of victims in the county cemeteries. Assisting him in the task was Albert Leveque and his cousin, Gaylord, relatives by marriage.

Shortly after dusk, Norton drove the dirt road that ran outside the walls of County Cemetery to Potters Field. The lane came to a dead end at the marshalling yards at Union Depot. Waiting there for him in a *Model T* were Albert and Gaylord. After the three turned off their engines, and exited their cars, Norton said,

“Good evening, Mr. Leveque; I hope you had some luck dissuading that gentlemen from Phillips County from sending his truck down to the docks. Sooner or later, Sheriff Tate will catch him. Remind him why we the only suppliers of liquor in this county.”

“He wants a greater part of the cut, sir.”

“That is not reasonable. Very well, have one of our associates in the House Pond inform the sheriff that bootleggers are coming to Gilridge on Fridays in a ragged farm truck. Under the guise of selling produce, they drop off milk bottles of moonshine. After he loses men, truck, and product, he will realize the utility of working through us. Additionally, it would be nice if the sheriff knew the locations of the several speakeasies that purchase this fellow’s merchandise. Do you think you can do that, Mr. Leveque?”

“Without problem, sir; I’ll take care of the details.”

“Thank you... Now, something more serious: that my sister Janice instructed you to undertake ‘a disappearance’ without my knowledge is disconcerting. While she has the authority to do so, disposing of her boy’s undesirable sweethearts cannot be justified as being vital to the continued existence of our business. Furthermore, such actions inspire fear in the fickle herd – in itself a useful condition; but without a lesson, what naughty behavior would they avoid? If every mill work and longshoreman fears unprovoked retribution, we cannot expect them to act predictably with regards to their self-interest. As I have said so many times before, I do not approve of our branching out into the liquor trade. Prior to the war, we were only concerned with political ambitions. Yet, with Prohibition, the situation exists where our agenda is threatened by outsiders spreading cash.” Albert Leveque rubbed his forehead, then said,

“It is easy enough to plant a rumor in the mill about the woman. Frankly speaking, I think it is a little late. Likely, they forgot her weeks ago. Remember, it is not unusual for her type to come and go.”

“Don’t worry about it, Mr. Leveque. From this point forward, no personal favors for any member of our number... particularly, Janice. Her affection for that boy is insalubrious. Likely, he is too ruined to take a place in our ranks. What a waste!”

“Certainly, sir... While we are on the subject, both of us agree that drugging our clients and then sinking them in the river is inefficient. It takes entirely too much time; all the while, we risking discovery.”

“My father set the standards: if the remains are intended to be found, the cause of death must appear to be an accident or suicide; otherwise, the person must disappear without a trace. In all cases, the individual must not be aware of what is happening nor be able to identify ‘the craftsman’. I welcome your suggestions, but do not experiment.”

*October 13, 1923.* Janice was right. From their first meeting, Veronica liked Max; likewise, there was nothing about her that he didn’t like. Immediately, the two spent time with each other when their studies permitted. Gradually, Max began to forget about Claudia.

Veronica and Max were enjoying a blissful Saturday morning together. The weather was remarkably warm and inviting. In the garden behind the Littlefield House, the couple spread a blanket on the lawn and reclined together, reading aloud Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *The Rivals* from an anthology. It was a class assignment. Max held the book aloft, while Veronica’s head rested on his chest. Playfully, they delivered the lines with amusing voices and frequently burst into fits of laughter. After finishing the play, they relaxed in a gentle embrace and gradually drifted into a late-morning nap.

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Ironically, Claudia languished in exile on Keres Island, her dignity defiled by fish guts. Each night she was relegated to the level of a filthy farm animal; stripping down in front of a horse and dumping pails of cold water over her head, all in an effort to make herself fit for the society of a foul-mouthed old woman. With each passing day, the blade of her knife romanced her with its promises.



She contemplated taking it home and opening an artery after her washing ritual – at least, she could die clean. Her faith in her savior Elwood was fading. Once again, the day of her rescue was pushed back. If he didn't come for in a week, she was determined to escape one way or another. This is the price she paid for loving Max. On one occasion at supper, Mrs. Terrell asked her whether a man was at the bottom of her troubles. Claudia only nodded. To this, the old lady said,

“A word to the wise, missy: anybody who plans to take everything from you will start by telling you fairytales about tomorrow. The truth is that your tomorrows started running out the minute he opened his mouth.”

That morning, Claudia joined the other workers waiting at the entrance of the cannery at ten minutes of eight. Once the doors opened, the women at her side vanished from her thoughts until the mid-morning break. After that, work resumed until the lunch hour. At that time, the women filed into the adjacent hall, and consumed the food that they brought from home - usually, a piece of meat and a biscuit. It hardly mattered since their hands and clothes reeked of fish. Working began again at one o'clock; there was a break in mid-afternoon; and then, the final push to quitting time. Having been engaged in this disgusting work for some time, her mind adapted, employing the deliberate single-mindedness that was requisite for maintaining a complete set of intact digits. After the production commenced, her attention was focused entirely on the motion of her blade. The mind, by any means, tries to protect itself: reflection and aspiration give way to the moment. Thus, working becomes transcendental; the person exists for the sensation of the repetition of the task; feeling is a luxury that taxes the mind, and endangers the body. Yet, the worse part was knowing that every day is the same; and each passing day was a further slipping away from humanity.

By day's end, Claudia numbly ambled across the street to Mrs. Tyrrell's house. There, she mechanically undertook her evening routine of scrubbing off the sweat, grime, and gore. The scent of fish, however, was persistent, permeating her hair and skin. After

washing her clothes and putting on her fresh dress, she sat down on the rear steps of the house and stared off into space. Tired and sore, the few steps required for the comfort of a hot meal and a soft bed seemed a labor of irksome difficulty. After some time had passed, she summoned up the ambition to rise to her feet. Before she could open the door, Elwood rounded the corner of the house. He proclaimed,

“I have good news for you, Sweet Pea. We’re taking you out of here next Saturday after work.”

“Why next Saturday? That’s another week! Why not now?” Elwood said,

“Do you want to walk to the back of the yard so we can talk about this in private?”

“No, I don’t, Mr. Elwood; I suppose that’s the only way... Go ahead... I’m coming.” When Claudia passed the stable, she took hold of the handle of an empty bucket, and carried it with her. She told him, “Do you mind taking this? I need it when we get back there. I can’t stand much longer.” He took the bucket, and then said,

“I know they’re working you to death in the cannery, but nobody will get nosy while you’re there. There are other folks on this island, and we cannot take the chance that they see you. They steer clear the cannery girls. They are so low that they are a few steps below the bottom of the pecking order. Nobody takes a job like that unless they don’t have better choices. I’ve only heard stories about them - who they are - but it is all gossip. That’s not the point. You’re hiding, and that is the best place to hide.” Claudia snatched the bucket from his hand, turned it over, and sat down on its bottom. She folded her arms, and said,

“Let me hear about next Saturday, Mr. Elwood!”

“Do what you usually do. We meet here after dark. Don’t bring anything but a change of clothes. That is all you need to know for now. If something doesn’t work out, don’t worry. We will keep trying. That is the best that I can tell you. The good news is that there is nothing going the rounds about you.” She said,

“Let me tell you about this place, Mr. Elwood. The women scale and gut fish the whole day. The knives are so sharp that you could slice open your hand just as easily as that fish. Today, when we were cutting, I realized that with one quick stroke across my throat... it would be over. The thought left my mind when we started, but it came back to me after I washed up just now. Preachers say that you will go to Hell if you think such things, but it is easy to talk about hope when you’re well-off. The cannery makes you forget about tomorrow... you become less than alive. That is what it is like in there.”

Claudia explained how recent experiences completely tore away the illusion that life was a great adventure, eventually culminating in the fulfillment of her dreams. It seemed, for a brief few weeks that happiness was within her grasp. A college boy was in love with her. She, in turn, loved him – since their first night out. All of the fantasies of future contentment that her mind manufactured vanished suddenly, taking the foundation of her spirit along. In a detached tone, Claudia stated that she could no longer entertain such childish notions. Escaping the nightmarish world in which she endured degradation and perpetual fear consumed her thoughts; yet, when finally, safe at home, she knew that there was no possible way that blind hopes would ever return – never. She told Elwood bluntly that if he failed to take her from the island within a week, she planned to leave on her own. By then, she would have enough pay in her pocket to get started. He promised to return in a few days.

*October 19, 1923.* Shortly before noon, Belfort Dibble appeared in the doorway of Sheriff Tate’s office. At his side, a sheepish looking Elwood fidgeted.

“Sheriff, I just had a talk with my wife. You know how she is – scared of her own shadow – but circumstances made her that way. Now, can we talk in private? Elwood wants to tell about some mischief she and the boys have been up to as for late. This is a humdinger, sir.” Tate frowned, invited them to take a seat, and then closed his office door. After hesitating under Belfort’s glare for a moment, Elwood said,

“I could use your help with a big problem, sir, and it can’t be shouted out around all creation. A girl’s life is at stake. Can you promise me that?”

“You’ll have to tell me, before I promise anything.”  
Apprehensively, he said,

“About a month ago, I was working late at the ironworks with Carson. We were out on the pier behind the building trying to get those damn overhead lights to stay on. About ten o’clock, Carson spotted some men in a dinghy stopped out in the middle of the river. Then, there was a splash and they cranked up their motor. We turned our flashlights out there just to see them racing off upriver. Then this cloth bag – like a big mail sack – popped up out of the water. The two of us jumped off the pier and swam out to it. Sure enough, it was a mail bag, all sealed up with a padlock... and there was a person inside! You could tell! So, we towed it back real-quick before it started taking on water. When we pulled the sack on the bank, I took out my knife and cut a hole in it. Then, the two of us yanked and tugged until we got a rip going. Out falls this body – stark naked, at that!”

“Are you playing with me, Elwood?”

“No, it’s all true! There was a live woman in that bag. At first, we thought she suffocated because she wasn’t moving, but I felt her mouth – breathing just fine. She was drugged. Being it was Saturday, we took her to the ironworks. Mama scrubbed her off and put her in one of Lucille’s dresses. The lady finally woke up, but she was real sick.”

“Who is she?”

“Her name is Claudia McMillan, a mill girl; she hales from the Piedmont – very young... no more than twenty, if that. Here was what she told us: she was walking home from work, and that was the last thing she remembered. It sounds like the ‘gray hoods’ to me. You know, they keep everybody too scared to talk. Well, we took her over to Keres Island to hide. So far, we haven’t heard a word about her around town. Have you?” Perplexed, Tate said,

“No... Let’s go see her.”

“Not yet! We need to get her back to her folks! Tomorrow night, we’re going to bring her over from the island, and drive her home. At least, that is the plan. The problem that is worrying us is that we expect the ‘gray hoods’ are biding their time, waiting for her to make a run for it.”

“What are you talking about, Elwood?”

“Mama is sure they are watching us; and you and your deputies snooping around won’t help matters. We have been delaying and delaying – not hearing a dang thing – but we have to move her soon. Nobody else should know about it. Can you do this one favor for us, Sheriff?”

“No, we are going out there tonight. I’m sure you remember my sister-in-law, Ethel Rouse... your childhood sweetheart, so I’m told? Not wanting to risk drawing any attention by going with you boys, I am going to send her over with you while I wait with your daddy. I figure the presence of another female might allay any apprehensions your lady might entertain. After that, I will take her to a safe place. Let *me* figure out a plan for surreptitiously spiriting her home.”

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*October 20, 1923.* After her rescue from Keres Island, Sheriff Tate took Claudia to a room in the basement of the county courthouse to take her statement. Having been assured that she was finally safe, Claudia revealed the name of her college boy. Hitherto, heeding Margie’s warning that he might be killed, she withheld his name – the Dibbles didn’t ask because they didn’t want to know. All the same, weeks of mind-numbing labor in the cannery compounded with psychological decline left her open to probing queries.

After a long hesitation, Claudia said,

“Promise me that nothing will happen to him.” Tate said,

“I assure you; there is nothing to worry about.”

“His name is Max Huffman...”

Upon hearing this, Sheriff Tate was stunned – not crazy Lucille’s boy! Then, there was his grandmother, Ida Huffman, the queen of the liquor runners – the woman that Lucille was accused of murdering. Tate couldn’t ignore those sinister connections.

“Is there anything else you can tell us, Miss McMillan?”

“Yes, Sheriff; there are some things. I boarded at Mrs. Lassiter’s house, two blocks from the mill. I passed the store at the corner about a block from there; that’s all that I remember. Before leaving the mill, I purchased lemonade at the company store with several of the other girls. If somebody drugged me, it had to happen there.”

“As you might expect, Miss McMillan, we have to speak with Max. I am, however, inclined to think that had he been a target, they would have snatched him by this time. What I suspect is that the kidnappers demanded ransom. Likely, something went wrong; or he paid up, but they planned to kill you all the same. With all due respect, you were abducted five weeks ago and not one person reported you missing.” Claudia placed her face in her hands, and inhaled deeply. After a moment, she looked Tate directly in the eyes and said,

“Do you suspect Max?”

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Janice was mortified! How could this be? Mr. Leveque took care of her! The deputy wanted Max to come to Sheriff Tate’s office at nine o’clock the next morning. In spite of her dismay, Max was in a state of shock. Now, he knew what happened to Claudia. Her unexplained disappearance was not voluntary. While she was consigned to a nightmarish struggle for survival, he forgot about her and fell in love with another girl. What was he to do if Claudia was still in love with him? What about Veronica? He deferred discussing his romance with the mill girl with his new lady-love. After the deputy left, Janice turned to Max and asked in feigned disbelief,

“This cannot be true! Were you involved with a mill girl?”

He was caught! While he struggled to confess to his mother-figure about his sojourn in the world of commoners, she had more

to worry about. Janice dreaded the possibility that since Claudia escaped death, there might be evidence... or witnesses. She spiked a cup of warm cocoa with a powerful sedative and gave it to him after telling him to jot down all he knew about the girl. It would help him organize his thoughts for his interview with the sheriff. In short order, he told her that he wanted to go to his room and shut his eyes for a moment. He would not be conscious again until she dragged him out of bed. Not long after Max slipped into his drug-induced tour of the netherworld, Janice placed a frantic call to Norton.

*October 20, 1923.* There was evidence: the mail sack. Elwood gave it to Sheriff Tate when they met Saturday. Before Max arrived for questioning, Tate spread it across his desk. After summoning Ethel into his office and shutting the door, he said,

“This is what we have to work with. Elwood and Carson said the sack when underwater, and then popped up a while later. That suggests that there was something attached weighting it down that came loose. Obviously, this is the property of the Post Office Department – the largest sack they use. The lock was patented in 1891, and it opens with a special key. The number ‘43’ is stamped on it. The postmaster said he will check his records on his way back from church. So, I am waiting to hear what you think.” Ethel looked inside the sack through the rip that the boys made, then said,

“This could have come from a mail car; or that matter, any post office. Elwood and Carson said the men who dumped her wore hoods. That, too, doesn’t mean they were ‘gray hoods.’ Ever since we caught the late Sam Calder and his unfortunate partner donning hoods – not to mention those two in the Dodge who accidentally blew themselves up – the town is obsessed with phantoms. The *Messenger* made it into a big thing – even made mention of Sam’s threat to drown me in the river. Somebody might be trying to send us down the wrong path.”

“Very well, what makes you think so?”

“The men could have taken her upriver. Instead, they throw her out of the boat in front of the ironworks dock; they failed to weight

the sack properly to keep her down; and the dose of whatever they gave the girl wasn't enough to kill her – very sloppy. That aside, Miss McMillan was a *nothing-girl*. Nobody missed her, or they simply didn't care. Even her so-called beau didn't pine over her long before finding another. Dr. White told me. I think the Huffman boy might have inherited his mother's propensities for homicide; or possibly, recruited Elwood and Carson into a plot to exact revenge on the Huffman boy for jilting her."

"That surprises me, Ethel. I thought you were on friendly terms with those boys."

"I am, sir; there is, however, a certain enmity they have for the boy's guardian, Janice Littlefield. While I think none of my conjectures are provable, I suggest we have to go fishing. Let's bluff and see how far it travels."

When Max arrived, he was brought in to Tate's office. After he introduced himself, she asked,

"Did you love her?"

"Yes, I did!"

"Maximillian Huffman, I have heard only good things about you. My name is Ethel Rouse. Perhaps, you already know that I am engaged to Dr. White; but it might come as a surprise to you that I am employed as a deputy. Sheriff Tate is my brother-in-law."

"Oh, yes, Deputy Rouse; first lady deputy in the history of the county."

"Yes and a few other things. You were in love with Claudia McMillan. Can you tell me what happened before she disappeared?"

"All was going well. We were planning to get married."

"To a mill girl? What would your Aunt Janice think?"

"She certainly wouldn't like it. But, after not speaking with me for a week, she would sit down and talk it through. Aunt Janice is very sweet. She keeps telling me that my happiness is foremost in her mind; I have no cause to think otherwise."



“How did she take the news last evening?”

“She said, ‘If you really loved her, I could have paid for her education without the slightest reservation – that, you see, would give her polish. There was no need for you to be secretive about it. That is, unless blackmail was part of it?’”

“Was it?”

“Of course not! Claudia is a nice girl from the country – innocent as they come. That was why I wanted to marry her. I really planned to do it, with or without Aunt Janice’s blessing!” Tate asked,

“So, how much were they asking for her? I mean the ransom.” Startled, Max said,

“What ransom?”

“You messed up with the ransom drop; or maybe, the kidnapper reneged on the deal; is that how it happened? It’s alright; you can tell us.” Ethel interjected.

“Is there any reason you can think of why she would mislead you into believing she was kidnapped? Did she ever mention Elwood and Carson Dibble?”

“What? You can’t mean the fellows from the ironworks that Mother is always complaining about?” Ethel paused, then asked,

“Mother? Don’t you mean Aunt Janice?”

“Yes; I mean Aunt Janice... What does that have to do with anything?” Tate stood up, took the mail sack from his desk, and handed it to Max.

“Supposedly, Claudia McMillan was drugged, locked in this sack and thrown out in the middle of the river. I’m not sure whether she would drown or suffocate first; either way, your sweetheart would be gone. If this wasn’t a kidnapping, who would want to murder her? Did you really love her, or was she a passing amusement? Maybe, she didn’t like being brushed aside for a society girl – particularly, if she gave herself to you?” Max exclaimed,

“No! I really loved Claudia! I tried to find her, but the folks at her boarding house said she ran out on me. Aunt Janice introduced me to Veronica after she was gone.” Ethel said,

“Maybe, Aunt Janice was trying to prevent you from throwing away your prospects on a *nothing-girl*?” Enraged, Max stood up, and said,

“That’s enough! I can see that you don’t have a case. Can I see Claudia?” Tate shook his head. Ethel said,

“She is on her way home. You will have to write her a letter. That is, if you happen to recall her address.” Max placed the mail sack on Tate’s desk and said,

“Unless you have further questions, I’m going on home.” Without a word, Tate escorted him to the door. After Max was gone, he turned to Ethel and said,

“Do you think we stirred up a hornets’ nest?”

*October 25, 1923.* At two-thirty in the afternoon, the jury was impaneled in the matter of the inquest on the bodies of Janice Littlefield and Maximillian Huffman. Dr. Hugh Wilson, Coroner of Gilridge County, presided over the proceedings. His assistant, Louis Claymont, presented the findings of the autopsies. Miss Littlefield and Mr. Huffman died of lethal dosages of a mixture of powerful sedatives and opiates consumed orally in cocoa. While his report was thorough in every respect, it could not be determined whether it was a case of double suicide or murder/suicide. Claymont noted that a search of the home produced the drugs in quantity which killed the two, in addition to other powerful analgesics and sedatives, all compounded by druggists. Next, Sheriff Tate was called to provide testimony.

“We received the call from a physician, Dr. William G. Bright, asking us to proceed to Miss Littlefield’s residence. The housekeeper, Mrs. Vera Watts, discovered the bodies in an upstairs bedroom. We were told by Mrs. Watts that it was the boy’s room. I assumed that neither the doctor or housekeeper touched the bodies or disturbed anything in the room. Mr. Huffman was found resting on his back,

fully clothed, with his hands on his stomach. Miss Littlefield was face down, close to Mr. Huffman, with her left arm draped over his chest. She, too, was fully dressed. There was a coffee set on a side table. The pot was a quarter full. Mr. Claymont's testimony covers the details. Dr. Bright observed that *rigor mortis* was starting to set in by the time I arrived – insomuch as I can say, they appeared to be stiffening. My investigation yielded no evidence to support the premise that one poisoned the other and then consumed a fatal dose of the concoction. However, I have no evidence to refute that conclusion.”

Dr. Wilson then called Veronica LeQuire to provide her account of her last day with Max. Tearfully, she recounted their studying together in the college library; follow by an exuberant walk around the lake on campus. For all indications, he appeared to be happy. He never told her about Claudia, but she didn't care about his past sweethearts. That evening, she had dinner with Janice and Max at the Southside Hotel. Both were in good spirits. When Dr. Wilson asked Veronica what she thought happen, she said,

“Max told me that Miss Littlefield occasionally gave him medications when he was tense or upset. She also rubbed his muscles after ball practice with a powerful liniment to relieve the soreness. It made him drowsy. She also rubbed it on her neck; and sometimes, took a swig from the bottle.” Dr. Wilson opened Mr. Claymont's report and glanced through the list of drugs found in the house. She said,

“I see... Miss Littlefield stocked up on this item. It contained chloroform, tincture of opium, and alcohol. It was compounded by a druggist in 1906 – very strange.”

When the inquest concluded, the jury accepted the probability that Janice and Max accidentally consumed an overdose. Likely, they were addicted to some of these substances. Ultimately, the scales tipped in that direction after the testimony given by Norton Littlefield. After Max was abandoned by his mother at the age of five, Janice assumed the responsibility of raising him. He was a sullen and withdrawn child; she, on the other hand, was overly attentive to

the point of smothering him. In spite of his robust health, she medicated him when he had the slightest complaint – particularly, to elevate his mood. Though he was uncertain, he suspected Janice was medicating herself. Doctors prescribed a battery of drugs for her ailments, most of which Norton thought imaginary.

After the inquest was adjourned, Sheriff Tate met Ethel on the steps of the courthouse. Ethel asked anxiously,

“Tell me; I need to know what happen in there!”

“They overdosed on opiates and sedatives – it wasn’t murder or suicide. We can send Miss McMillan home.”

“She wants to attend the services.”

Oh, no; that means we will have to be there, too. We should have sent her home last week.”

“Maybe, we should not have told Max she left. We deprived them of a last time to be together.” Tate shook his head.

“Do you want to tell that to Miss LeQuire? She is still inside. What is done is done; regardless of our actions, the course was set. Don’t ask me what I think really happened because the answer is somewhere out of reach. Let’s go.”

Not long after Ethel and Sheriff Tate left, Norton came out of the courthouse with Albert Leveque following not far behind. When they reached the pavement, Norton turned to Leveque and said,

“Damnation, Albert; she had to take the boy with her! I don’t understand! Tate didn’t have a case; I told her that, over and again.”

“As improbable as it might seem, sir, do you think the boy did this?”

“What can I say? Perhaps... Likely... At the moment, I have business matters that demand my attention, Good day to you, sir.

## THE LITTLEFIELD NOTE

*November 26, 1923.* After consuming a hearty meal in the dining hall of the Railroad Hotel after work, Ethel decided to take a brief stroll around her old haunts near the depot. Rounding a corner, she happened to see the same farm truck parked in an alley that Sheriff Tate suspected was being used to deliver moonshine to the fly-by-night joints that were springing up around the docks. Immediately, she ran back to her automobile, and moved it to within a safe distance of the alley. There, she waited until the truck left, intent upon following it back to the place from which it came. On leaving the alley, the truck lumbered down Mulberry Avenue to River Street, and then turned south. She followed at a distance behind in the twilight, her headlights dark. When the truck stopped at the burnt out shell of Fischer's Paint & Varnish, she parked about two blocks away and observed. The driver removed a wooden crate from the rear of the truck and carried it inside. Ethel decided at this point, she wanted to see who came for the box. There was only so far she could drive without her lights. The truck could wait. Taking her bag, she sprinted down the sidewalk, finally taking cover in the doorway of an abandoned building across from the ironworks about three hundred feet from the truck. Momentarily, the man came out of the ruins, got into his truck, and drove off. Ethel stealthily made her way around the block, and entered the derelict building through the rear. By this time, it was twilight. Without trying to find the box, she hid behind the remains of an interior wall opposite to where the front door used to be. With her Colt .41 in hand, she waited.

After what seemed like hours, Ethel heard somebody walking outside the walls. Immediately, her heart began to race. At that instant, she questioned the wisdom of undertaking this surveillance alone. Repeatedly, Sheriff Tate told her to never approach a potentially dangerous situation without another deputy. She should have remained at a distance near the watch station of the harbor patrol – too late. When the shape of a man blacked the doorway, her breathing stopped. Once inside, the man struck a cigarette lighter,

and started looking around. As he approached Ethel, she brought her revolver to the ready. The man moved forward into the room in which she was hiding. Then, much to her horror, she spied the box of jugs at her feet by the light of the dim flame. There was no way out of the situation; she had to make her presence known... assertively. In a firm tone, she said,

"I have a gun trained on you, mister. I am a crack shot, too. So, let's see you..." In an instant, happening synchronously, the flame when out, an immense arm wrapped around her waist from behind, and another took hold of her right arm. Ethel's gun discharged, and the bullet ricocheted off the brick wall. "Jesus! Get that gun away from that damn-fool woman!" The arm around her tightened like a vise, and her feet left the ground. She felt the buttons on the man's coat pressing into her back. Passing the revolver from her right hand to her left, she aimed it down at the feet of the man holding her, and fired off two shots. He dropped her to the ground, and then gave her a kick in the lower back. Ethel cried out in pain. When the other man struck his lighter, she reflexively shot at the flame. "Damn! Jesus! Damn-damn-damn! She got me! Took off my thumb, damn it, Braxton! Forget the liquor!" Ethel scrambled along the ground away from the man who kicked her. She screamed,

"Stop where you are! You hear me! I'll shoot! I'll shoot you dead!" At that moment, the harsh light of a carbide lamp from outside cut through the darkness, and then the sound of Elwood's voice,

"What the hell are you doing to that woman?" Ethel cried out,

"Elwood, don't you dare come in here! There are two of them! Call for help!" He replied,

"Oh, hell... Ethel Rouse!" As Ethel trained her revolver on Braxton, the beam of the lamp from without flashed about wildly. Then, the man with the shot-off thumb landed flat on his face in the center of the room. Elwood said from outside the door opening, "I hope you have the gun." She said,

"Of course, I have the gun! Didn't I tell you to stay outside?" The beam of the lamp lit up the room, and Elwood entered. Without

dropping her aim, Ethel rose to her feet. The large fellow who manhandled her stood frozen with trembling hands raised. He said,

“Don’t shoot! I give up, ma’am! Who are you?”

“A lady! You’re under arrest!”

With Elwood’s assistance, Ethel marched the two malefactors out into the street. The shots resounded through the neighborhood, causing residents and dockworkers considerable concern. Without delay, the harbor constables arrived, follow by the city police. They were treated to a pretty sight. The unfortunate fool who had the cigarette lighter sat in the street. Having lost his thumb from the first joint, he held a bloody handkerchief tightly around the nub, eyes closed and rocking back and forth. Sniffing, he repeatedly muttered, “Oh, Lord, the woman shot off my thumb... damn it! She did it; she really did it!” Elwood kept watch over him. To their side, Braxton, a hulking man, hands cuffed behind his back and on his knees, was being scolded by Ethel,

“Shame on you! You are not a gentleman! Ladies don’t like being treated roughly, particularly having their insides mashed out! Mr. Braxton, I am awfully disappointed in you! What will your mother think when she finds out what kind of mischief you’ve been into? Lord knows, you’re a disgrace!” The captain of the police called out,

“What on the Earth have you been doing, Miss Deputy Ethel Rouse? I know all about you! George Tate crows about you being some born hell-on-wheels law-lady with a sassy tongue that can outshoot everybody like an Annie Oakley, pray tell; and a brimstone Calamity Jane daredevil, so forth. Did you shoot that man’s finger off?”

“Yes, I did!”

“Why did you want to go and do that?”

“These two did not want to behave like nice boys when I tried to arrest them. They were picking up that box of liquor. They wanted

to throw me around, stomp me, and kick me to pieces. That was mean!”

“Are you hurt?”

“A little bit... that doesn’t matter. I could not let them get my gun.” The captain asked Elwood

“Is that what happened?”

“Yes, sir; when I came in, they were trying to beat her. She was giving them the worse, like a wildcat.” Ethel interjected,

“Wildcat?” Shaking his head, the captain said,

“I know you are! This fellow needs a doctor, and the rest of you need to come with me to the station. Why wasn’t there somebody else with you, Miss Deputy Ethel Rouse?”

“There wasn’t time... everything was happening then and there. Do you think it would have been better to let them get away?”

“You’re going to get yourself killed some day... Seeing that you bested these varmints, I wouldn’t take it as a go ahead to keep trying to do things on your own. I mean it, and I’m going to tell Sheriff Tate to keep a leash on you, wildcat.”

*November 27, 1923.* Upon arriving at work Tuesday morning, Sheriff Tate called Ethel into his office.

“I see you created something of a ruckus last night. Are you hurt?”

“A scrape here and there; it’s nothing to worry about, Sheriff.” The bruise under her ribs on the right side of her back was swollen and tender. There were smaller bruises on her right arm, and scrapes on her hands. Stoically, she endured the discomfort and had no intention of telling anybody, especially, Sheriff Tate. “Such things happen, sir.”

“Yes, things happen when you fail to call for assistance. Don’t do that again. I promised Liz that you would be safe working for me. Besides that, the county commissioners think the extent of your duties is researching records and escorting lady prisoners to court.



One of them, that loud mouth with the gasoline stations, does not like the idea that I hired my sister-in-law. It is a good thing that the boys at the *Messenger* agreed not to make mention of your name in their article about all that pandemonium you created last night.” Tate reached into his desk and removed a chocolate bar. Offering it, he said,

“Take this, and then pay a visit to Coroner Wilson. Deputy Fales will be accompanying you on this assignment in the event you stumble into another scrap.”

Ethel frowned, stared at the chocolate bar, and then snatched it from his fingers. Disingenuously, she said,

“Thank you, sir. It is good that you are so attentive to my needs.” With those words, she stormed out of the office.

“Come back in here, Deputy Rouse. I’m not finished.” After a moment, Ethel reappeared in the doorway. She said,

“Excuse me, sir; I was just having a conniption – nothing to be troubled about. Please continue.”

“Congratulations on your first arrests.” With those words, her frown abruptly transformed into a broad smile.

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Sunday afternoon, Norton Littlefield, the Director of County Cemeteries, was found shot outside his office on the grounds of the main cemetery. Apparently, he was shot at close range from behind, brought down by a single bullet. There were no witnesses. Norton, generally well-liked, was a local bureaucrat – not particularly remarkable, but from an old family. Who would want to murder him? This was a bizarre crime in itself, yet it nearly a month after the mysterious “accidental” deaths of his sister and her ward. With this in mind, Coroner Wilson conducted a more comprehensive autopsy than the situation usually required. Still, the cause of death was unquestionably the obvious, the gunshot. In the course of inventorying personal items found on the corpse, he discovered a folded piece of paper tucked away in the dead man’s wallet. The

writing on it was incomprehensible. It read “C285North C294North E441Top F551West G601West G612Top G614South H750East H653Top ERWilliamsBottom SAClarkBottom FMHaarBottom CNJacksonBottom.” He copied out the text and sent it to Tate. Similarly, the sheriff was stumped. Who were Williams, Clark, Haar, and Jackson? The rest of the message looked like box numbers or something of the sort. This was definitely a problem for his golden girl.

When Ethel arrived at the morgue, Dr. Wilson greeted her warmly, and then handed her a copy of the strange code.

“So, Miss Rouse, we have the opportunity to work together on another puzzle. Can you make any sense of it?” After examining the note for a moment, she said,

“No, but I would start with the names. If they live here, we ought to find them in the city directory. Those numbers are all ascending, so that makes me think that the letters might mean something else.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s say, ‘C’ is Second Street – the third street from the river; so, ‘E’ is Fourth Street, ‘G’ is Sixth, and ‘H’ is Seventh. It looks like directions to something, sir, or a route.”

“Go ahead and give it a try. Sheriff Tate said you can work on this for a few days. Good luck!”

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When Ethel and Deputy Fales looked through the current city directory, they found only one name that was listed on the telegram, Charles N. Jackson. His occupation was shipping clerk, and he worked for the McIntire Tile & Brick Company northeast of the town limits. When Fales called the company office, the manager told him that he died of heart failure in September. Perhaps, Charles N. Jackson was not CNJackson? Ethel thought otherwise.

“Norton Littlefield was in the business of taking care of dead people.”

She recommended that they take a look at death certificates in the Office of the Register of Deeds. Once there, it didn't take long for the two to find all the names. They varied in age and cause of death. Everybody died between January, 1917 and September, 1922. Fales asked,

“What do these people have in common?”

“Other than being dead, I don't know. Maybe, we ought to start on the numbers?”

“East, west, north, south, top, and bottom; the compass directions, I understand... So, Ethel, top means the attic and bottom means the basement? What does that have to do with these dead folks?”

“Let's start with the numbers. Without looking at a street map, I can tell you that regardless of what street you start with, if you draw a line from C285 to H750, it is going to be an angle running west to northeast or southeast. From the center of town, the addresses run from number one to wherever they stop – say, 750 North Seventh and 750 South Seventh. Since we're downtown, let's find a pad of graph paper. Then, we can fill in the squares that approximate the positions of these numbers. Deputy Fales, do you think that I'm a wildcat?”

“No.”

“Oh... Well, let's get to work.”

After purchasing a pad of graph paper, they went to the public library, found a table, hand plotted out their diagram of the numbers. They created seven rows, “A” through “H” and divided each row into ten parts; thus, it became apparent that each row contained ten sets of ten, or one hundred numbered items running left to right. Ethel said,

“Now, what you want to do is mark the square on the east, west and so forth of the square that is marked.”

“What about top and bottom?”

“I have not figured that out, yet. Obviously, it means up or down, above or below, on top or beneath.”

“The ground?”

“The ground... Yes! Oh, yes! The ground! Beneath the ground!” Delighted, she threw her arms around Deputy Fales, and quickly kissed him on the cheek in an impulse.” Startled, he proclaimed,

“Deputy Rouse! What are you doing? This is the public library!” In an instant, she took her arms from around Fales, sat straight ahead in her chair and cast her eyes down at the tabletop. Smiling mischievously, she said,

“Sorry, Bob; I do not know what came over me. They’re grave numbers.” Suddenly, his eyes lit up. “We need to pay a visit to the cemetery.” With a suppressed giggle, she continued, “If we’re right, Sheriff Tate is going to kiss you, too.”

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Ethel and Bob arrived at the main cemetery at a quarter after four. The caretaker, a retired clerk for the railroad named William Sics, opened the office so the two could examine the original drawings for the layout of the cemetery. Each section was given a letter; and each grave in that section, a number. The plots in each, however, are not necessarily arranged in a grid; when they were, the number of rows did not correspond to the deputies’ diagram. They considered whether the letters in the code referred to section letters. Then, Mr. Sics made a recommendation.

“Let’s take a look at the plat for Potters Field.” After unrolling the ancient drawing, he explained, “While seven hundred people buried are not there, the cemetery was laid out in a grid so that many closely spaced graves could fit. Since the cemetery’s establishment in the late 1850s, the practice for burials in Potters Field was to skip every other grave and row, so the risk of digging into the neighboring grave would be reduced. Even so, all seven rows had a few graves. Each row is lettered. New rows could between them if there ever was a need.” Ethel exclaimed,

“This is it! All the folks who disappeared over the years ended up here: bodies were buried in graves that were supposed to be empty, or in graves that were already occupied!” Aghast, Mr. Sics asked,

“Don’t tell me you suspect Mr. Littlefield was some type of fiend?”

Crystal clear at last! A year earlier, an effort to exhume the remains of a woman for reburial in the main cemetery nearly exposed the scheme. Her grave was empty. As it turned out, the numbered marker was inadvertently placed on the adjoining plot. While Tate searched for nonexistent grave robbers, Coroner Wilson and Ethel discovered the error – or was it. They found other anomalies in Potters Field, but Wilson knew it was impossible to get permission from a judge to dig up graves without sufficient cause. Now, he had it! Since some of the plots listed were supposed to be empty, the judge was likely to grant permission for him to explore these. If he found a body, that justified returning to the judge for permission to excavate the rest on the list. All the same, if the remains of the missing turned up in the cemetery, the mystery was far from being solved. Was Norton Littlefield a murderous fiend, or was he hired by others to dispose of the inconvenient results of their handiwork?

*December 6, 1923.* Ethel was assigned to Coroner Wilson’s team in Potters Field. The judge allowed him to go forward with excavating the plots that were supposed to be empty. If he discovered remains, the judge planned to allow him to continue on to the graves which the note implied two occupants were buried. Employing four gravediggers from outside the county and his assistant, Mr. Claymont, Wilson commenced his work. Without fail each day, beginning on Monday, they assembled at first light on the road in front of the graves. Ethel, bundled up to ward off the frosty chill, spent the entire day observing and taking notes for the sheriff. For the most part, the week was clear, frigid, and bracing. After discovering a body – skeletal remains wrapped in rotting burlap – the work slowed to a crawl. Measurements, photographs, and cautious probing followed. The men took frequent breaks, about once every

two hours. Ethel, initially nauseated by her first encounter with decaying flesh and bones, fought her revulsion, dutifully taking notes and asking questions. In time, she became interested, and the ghoulish undertaking became less offensive. In part, Dr. Wilson took pains to explain everything in an engaging and professorial fashion. Mr. Claymont, a good-natured, young fellow, was disarmingly personable. The gravediggers were polite and respectful, taking their solemn task seriously. However, the overall experience was physically and mentally disagreeable beyond ordinary discomfort. Soon, Wilson was uncovering “fresher” corpses wrapped tightly in thick canvas. On Wednesday, Wilson was permitted to extend his inquiry to the occupied graves. Whether he was allowed to open the named graves in the main cemetery was contingent upon him finding two occupants in those in Potters Field. The first of these opened contained a wooden box buried about four feet below the surface of one grave, he told Ethel,

“There we go, Deputy Rouse. This is not the type of wooden box that the county uses to bury paupers. It looks like our culprit put his friend inside something to keep a dip from forming on the surface of the grave when the body started to decay. It looks rather sturdy to me.” She added,

“It looks like the rough crates used for shipping heavy machinery. I use to work in the freight office. Occasionally, I had to go to the warehouse for one reason or another. See those nail holes? There used to be a board nailed crossways. If the holes are lined up, it will give us an idea of what size crate. The fellows at the freight depot can tell us the rest.”

“You’re sharp as they come. Are you sure you want to work with Sheriff Tate? I could use you in my office.”

Throughout the week, Ethel observed the removal of the undocumented bodies from their graves. Wilson decided they should work in the morgue. Having unearthed the remains of eight persons, he faced the problem of identifying the remains and determining the cause of their deaths. Most, except those buried in makeshift coffins,

were deteriorated to the point where an exact identification was impossible. From bones, he could deduce sex, age, height, and race. Albeit a meager body of information, he was able to posit some likely associations with the physical descriptions of several missing individuals. The remains found in the box proved more promising. To begin with, the desiccated corpse was well-preserved. Though bundled in a square of canvas and stripped down to her under garments, Wilson and Claymont determined that the woman was likely in her late thirties or early forties, she was exceptionally tall and thin, her hair was auburn, and the bones in her right foot were deformed. It appeared to be the body of a housekeeper named Susie Hamlin who disappeared at the start of the influenza epidemic. Her relatives suspected that she was buried in the mass grave in the main cemetery. Wilson oversaw the burial of flu victims, and established the protocols. Scrupulously, the bodies were buried with a stamped metal identification tag, and their names were entered into the registry. Furthermore, Susie did not die of influenza. Her third cervical vertebra was crushed. Somebody broke her neck. Adding to this evidence, Ethel found two sections of a five-digit number stenciled on the boards of the makeshift coffin. After researching shipping records in the railroad freight office, she found the same number on an invoice dated July 3, 1918. The crate contained ornamental brass castings purchased by the Huffman Boatyard on the Northeast River. The business moved to the Southside docks in Gilridge in August, 1918. The person signing for the shipment was Johnathan Allen, a shop supervisor who worked for the business, now deceased. Ethel was chagrined to see she was the clerk who verified the delivery – an echo from her past career.

Before Ethel went home in the evening, Dr. Wilson said,

“Tell Sheriff Tate that I think we have something. “If I am correct, these remains belong to Susie Hamlin. She would have been forty-three years old when she disappeared in September of 1918. Her occupation was housekeeper for a widow who lives near the college. She lived on Mulberry Avenue, about a block and half east of the cemetery. What could she have done to get herself killed?”

“In my opinion, sir, she knew something... likely, stumbled into it; or maybe, she was being nosy... like me. That is how I came to work for the sheriff. I was nosy. Be that as it may, it might be worthwhile to take a second look at her employers; seeing that now it is a homicide investigation.”

*December 10, 1923.* Sheriff Tate notified the family of Susie Hamlin, telling them that it appeared likely that Dr. Wilson discovered her remains. Her father, a gaunt farmer of sixty-four years, traveled from Phillips County to speak with the sheriff about taking her home for a proper burial. Unfortunately, Tate could not give him a definite answer. The appearance of the father, however, provided the sheriff with the opportunity to learn more about the woman. His initial report included a wealth of details concerning her physical characteristics, but fell short describing her as a person. Many individuals went missing during the epidemic; he assumed she, like others, found employment elsewhere. That was the case of several of those originally thought missing at the time. There were others, before and after the pestilence, whose disappearance was more mysterious.

Susie, as her father admitted, was a “Plain Jane” with no qualities that distinguish her from anybody, both in demeanor and skills. She had a deformed right foot and walked with a slight limp. Her education was minimal, and she was not ambitious; nor was she a starry-eyed dreamer. She did the work that was required of her and nothing more. Overall, Susie had a friendly disposition, but was not inclined to socialize. Like her father, she was skinny and figureless. Though appearing fragile, her whole life was spent doing physically demanding labor. If she had gentlemen friends, her father did not have a clue. He speculated that it was likely she did, but they must not have been worth the trouble of mentioning in her letters, which came infrequently. He did, however, recall the name of a friend. Her name was Barbara Chapman, and she worked in the railroad telegraph office.

Sheriff Tate knew Barbara, and so did Ethel. After concluding their conversation with Mr. Hamlin, they drove together to the depot. On seeing the two, Barbara exclaimed,



“Well, I do declare! If it isn’t that handsome lawman, Sheriff Tate, and his deputy, Ethel Rouse! Sheriff, I have a bone to pick with you. Why did you up and go marry Liz Rouse when I was dead set on snagging you? Why did you go do such a thing?” Ethel laughed, then said,

“My word, Sheriff! How many hearts did you break around town?” He replied jokingly,

“Too many, I suppose.”

“So, Sheriff, what brings you down here? Did you catch me misbehaving?”

“No, Barbara, we need your help with Susie Hamlin. I’m sure you heard the news.” Suddenly, Barbara’s playful mood slipped away, and she assumed a more subdued tone.

“Yes, the *Messenger* said that somebody snapped her neck... and she was buried all this time. I thought she got away – the flu and all... and the men in the hoods. They tried to grab her once.” Tate frowned, and said,

“I sure wish you had come forward with this before.” She said,

“You remember those times. People were dropping left and right. Then, there was Ethel’s friend – I felt so sorry for her – and after all that was done, somebody blew up our boarding house with dynamite. Besides, I thought Susie was clear and free of this place. Let’s go outside for some air.” After they walked as far as the freight warehouse, Barbara stopped. Ethel asked,

“Do you know what she did to get them after her?” Uneasily, Barbara said in a hushed tone,

“Until Prohibition, I’ve never heard of these fellows in the gray hoods and the like, but everybody was afraid of Pete. That is, until he turned up dead. She stayed clear of his type and wasn’t one to mix with the soldiers, or go out to dance, much less see the picture show. Susie was older than us. What she like to do was watch people. That’s what brought her downtown on the weekends. We met that way. She thought I was outgoing and friendly – and I am – and that I liked to

talk – and I do. We became friends. Now, just after those first people started dying of the flu, Susie said that she saw something peculiar. She was walking down Mulberry from Mrs. Phelps' place to that little cottage where she lived behind the big house on Eighth Avenue. Your friend, Elwood Dibble comes up alongside her on a bicycle – she liked him even though he was a lot younger. Anyway, he said that he picked up a bottle of peach brandy. It was possibly the last one he was going to get since it was rumored that the public health officer was shutting the downtown shops. He invited Susie to drink it with him. She told him that she couldn't bring fellows into her place because her landlady wouldn't have it. So, they decided to go down the dirt road by the cemetery that leads down to the tracks. They talked and drank and other things until dark. Elwood fell asleep on her, and Susie couldn't get him to wake up. She decided to leave him there, and go home on her own. While walking past Potters Field, she heard two men and a woman talking. She tried to duck into the woods, but they heard her. Then, Susie took off down the road as fast as she could run on that foot, yelling for help. The men caught up with her, grabbed her arms, and covered her mouth. Elwood came up out of nowhere, beat both of them about the head until they were on the ground. Taking hold of Susie, the two ran all the way to her little house. That Elwood was like one of those old-time knights; or maybe, the cowboy that rescues the girl from the bandits... Well, there is a little more to it. Susie lost her bag in the struggle, and it had her name sown inside. The last time I saw her, she said men in hoods tried to pull her into a car, but she got away. She planned to skip town any way possible." Sheriff Tate said,

"So, we have a woman in league with the 'gray hoods'. Did she say anything about her?"

"No, Sheriff, just that... I sure hope you're going to look after me since I told you all of this. You would be awfully sorry to find me dumped on the side of the road. Think of all the wonderful chitchat you would be missing."

"Not a word, Barbara. We didn't hear anything from you." Ethel said,

“Elwood needs a talking to, right now. It never fails! That rascal only tells you half the story.”

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“Oh, hell... Ethel Rouse!”

“Elwood, what did I tell you about using profane language in the presence of a lady?” Ethel stood over the workbench in the ironworks, scowling. Sheriff Tate stood beside Ethel, his arms crossed and shaking his head. Elwood exhaled, then said,

“I don’t know what it is, but every time I turn around... what now? Hold on before you answered that. Let’s step outside, and take a walk down the wharf. Promise me, Ethel; this time, we are not going to spend the whole evening at this.”

“I’m not promising you anything. Tell the truth, Elwood; we’ll go from there.”

On walking clear of the workers, Ethel continued,

“Today, we found out about a little excitement that you had with hooded men in the cemetery. Your lady friend, Susie Hamlin, saw something that cost her dearly. Can you tell me about it?”

“What? Not Susie? You’re not telling me they got her?” Tate said,

“You must not read the newspaper.”

“Susie was nice. She wasn’t involved in anything. I thought she left town – she said that was her plan – honest, Sheriff!”

“What did she see?”

“There were three “gray hoods” standing over a grave in Potters Field – two men and one woman. There was a kerosene lantern at the foot of the grave – it was like the ones they use in the railroad yards. The woman was tall, dressed in black with a road hat. She wore some type of long veil. I caught a glimpse of her while trying to stop those men from doing something to Susie. This lady was something to see, even with the dim light: taller than average; and very ample,

but slim around the middle. That is as much as I saw of her. After I gave the men a thrashing, we ran to Susie's little house. I left my bicycle in the woods – never been back for it. Anyway, when Susie calmed down, she told me that those fellows were digging up a grave. It was a new one. All this happened at the start of the flu.”

“That must have been Emma's grave!”

“Yes, that's right; she was your friend. The first one who died... When the woman caught sight of Susie, she pulled out a knife. I saw it, too! Long blade! It looked to be a good eight or ten inches. That is the whole of it. After that, I saw Susie once, and she was getting out of town. Are you sure it's her?”

“Coroner Wilson seems to think so.”

“That's an awful shame. I liked her. She might have been older, and not very pretty, but there was something about that sweet smile – really friendly. It didn't take much to entertain Susie, and it was easy to feel comfortable around her. Good company, that lady; she never wanted anything other than spending time with somebody... and it didn't matter who as long as she liked them.” Ethel frowned, and said,

“You're wrong about that, Elwood. A lady doesn't act that way unless she cares very much about the man. You took her for granted. Still, acting as you did to save her was very brave. I'm proud of you for that, albeit there is no man on the Earth more exasperating than you. How is it that you can act so selfishly most of time and in the blink of an eye, risk life and limb to rescue those that don't mean that much to you?”

“Wouldn't you do the same, Ethel? You're every bit as selfish – mean, too – and certainly dead-set on getting what you want; but you'll give up your life to save somebody – even me.”

“Your flattery always leaves me with the feeling of having been insulted. All true; but we are not here to talk about that. How well did you know Norton Littlefield?”

“As you know, Lucille Calder owns one-third of the ironworks, but she is in the state hospital. Her step-sister, Janice Littlefield had

power of attorney until she gave Louise's boy an overdose, and then killed herself." Tate interjected.

"The inquest ruled their deaths accidental."

"Accident, my foot; I think Janice and the boy were afraid they were going to get caught for trying to drown that McMillan girl. Anyway, Norton ended up with Janice's estate for a few weeks, so I guess his wife now has power of attorney. I've never met her. Nobody has come around to tell us what is going on with Lucille's share. That is all that I know."

*December 12, 1923.* Since early morning, Ethel and Sheriff Tate searched for clues to the secret life of Norton Littlefield at the cemetery. Hitherto, they solved a backlog of missing persons cases and acquired new homicide investigations simultaneously. Was Norton Littlefield behind these crimes? It was certainly beginning to look like the affable bureaucrat led a double life. If that was true, Sheriff Tate could not imagine that he worked alone, nor did he believe he was a murderous fiend. By early afternoon, Tate was frustrated.

"Do you understand this, Ethel?"

"We do not have a suspect or a motive for the murder of Norton Littlefield. There are thirteen grave notations on his list. I suppose he kept it so he would not lose track of where the bodies were buried. Dr. Wilson excavated all, finding eleven. Two unmarked graves in Potters Field were empty. Even so, he found two hardwood coffins of reasonable quality – the only two! We found lot numbers for the hardware, and were able to identify the manufacturer. Both coffins were made in January, 1922. That would make them the last on the list. Of the eight individuals we have that were listed missing, only Alton Cryder, missing since September, 1922, fits. The other seven disappeared before the coffins were made. Unfortunately, we don't have a corpse. Dr. Wilson, however, found slight residue in the coffins suggesting they were occupied briefly. Of the remains recovered, most were decayed beyond positive identification.

Curiously, the body of Miss Hamlin showed signs of a violent death; whereas the rest, the cause could not be determined.”

“That strange – no knife marks, bullets, or broken bones.”

“That leaves drowning, poisoning, and suffocation. Dr. Wilson is looking into that. Continuing, most of the bodies tenuously match persons who disappeared in 1917 through 1919. Those persons resided in the Horse Pond District, or were last seen there. This was the time when the infamous Pete terrorized the neighborhood. Though you found his body, Dr. Wilson could not figure out how long it was frozen solid, or where something like that could be done. Lucille Calder claimed the body was that of her husband Peter Hoffman, and it proved to be false. Closer to home, Liz and the woman he abducted, Miss Cowan, agree that he was the man called Pete.”

“How did we get on Pete?”

“The bodies in Potters Field might be his handiwork? Since his death, terrible things have happened to those in his sphere: his so called wife Lucille was committed, his so call son Max is dead, his so call mother Ida is dead; Lucille’s step-sister Janice is dead; and now Norton.”

“What about the tall woman in the cemetery and her friends?”

“She certainly was not Norton’s wife. That lady is petite and not particularly ‘ample’ and ‘slim around the middle’. It could have been Janice. Don’t you agree, sir?”

“How do you figure that every time we wade into this mess your friends the Dibble brothers are part of the tangle?”

“Crazy Lucille Calder is involved.” Sheriff Tate grumbled,

“Very well, Ethel; let’s pay her a visit. Mind you, nothing she says will stand up in court. Then again, all our likely suspects are dead.”

*December 15, 1923.* The State Hospital for the Insane was located about 100 miles northwest of Gilridge by rail. The buildings of its campus were unremarkable and constructed of red brick. It looked

like a school rather than a prison. Yet, it was surrounded by a high brick wall, and entered through a wrought iron gate attended by a guard. When Ethel and Sheriff Tate arrived, they were escorted to the parlor in the medical building to wait while Lucille was brought from her dormitory.

The room was quite nice. It had a sofa and several tastefully upholstered chairs. The wall paper was pastel green with a simple pattern. Missing were end tables, flower vases, and lamps. The room was illuminated by overhead lights. Ethel was surprised by the absence of anything seasonal. Even the passenger car of their train had a few modest Christmas decorations. She remarked that even after sitting in the room for five minutes, she felt listless. Tate felt the same. The wall clock ticked loudly, its beat becoming hypnotic. Forty-five minutes passed while Lucille was being prepared for the visit. In the meanwhile, Tate slipped into a nap as Ethel turned her thoughts to life outside the window. The sky was starting to cloud.

A few minutes before Lucille was brought in, a doctor entered and introduced himself. Sheriff Tate was jolted from his doze by the sound of his voice. Then, Lucille was escorted in by a nurse. Actually, she was guided by the arm like a blind person. Her dress was exceptionally nice; her hair and makeup were prepared flawlessly. What startled Ethel were her eyes. She looked straight ahead as if watching something behind the person to which she was speaking. Her smile was fixed, no matter the topic. After being seated on the sofa, she said,

"Oh-my, you are Ethel Rouse... or perhaps, your twin sister Liz. No matter, how is Elwood? Is the ironworks open yet?" Ethel said,

"It is very successful. Elwood and Carson have about a dozen men working there on any given day. Business appears good!"

"Sheriff Tate, are you here to chat with me, too? I hope this has nothing to do with that unpleasantness with Ida. I told you that it was the postman. As I said before, the woman helped me escape before the house blew up." Tate said,

"Tell me, was this woman tall, thin in her waist, and full above?"

"Perfect; I think like the huntress. She was fit, and dashed through the alley quite swiftly. She took me to the woods to meet with her gentlemen friends - two with hoods. There she explained what I must do to ensure Max was rescued from the men upriver - he is now with Janice... I put on the blindfold, and promised not to peek. The hooded gentlemen took me for a ride until morning." Tate said,

"That is what you told us. We want to know a little more about Pete. He was not the man you married."

"He was my husband, just the same. A replacement might be a better word. This was before the war. Ida sent for him because she needed another son; thus she rechristened him Peter Huffman. He did her bidding. Generally speaking, he was not a good husband. He neglected me. Actually, Pete avoided me from the beginning. While he was living, I recall seeing him only three times – all unpleasant situations." Ethel asked,

"What prompted you to go into business with Elwood and Carson?"

"Taxes... I inherited the deed to the ironworks when my step-father passed away."

"That was Alvin Littlefield; the natural father of Janice and Norton."

"Yes, Ethel; you certainly attend to your studies. Elwood also said that you were smarter than the rest. He thinks highly of you... despite your mean streak." Lucille smiled for a moment, and then resumed. "When the boys approached me with their proposal to purchase two-thirds interest in the ironworks, I agreed – they arranged all the particulars through Belfort's attorney. When all was ready, they spirited me out of the house to sign the papers when Ida was away. Ida and Pete were angry when they discovered my dealings. Pete snatched the boys while they were working alone in their father's garage. I was taken earlier in the day. I can't say where because I was blindfolded all the time. Once there, I was lifted up and made to stand on a chair – they tied a cord around my neck. Pete said, 'I do not want to hear a word. If you so much as whisper when



they bring in the boys, my men will kick that chair out from under you! Providing those boys learn their lesson, keep reminding them that the Dibbles owe the family a favor.” Tate interjected.

“What is this favor?”

“It has something to do with Belfort’s brother... a long time ago. I don’t know what it was, but our kinsfolk made him disappear... or maybe, not... ask Elwood. Be that as it may, the boys went to work for Ida. They opened that old brick culvert under her house that led down to the river. After that, they started with the other end under Belfort’s garage, so the culvert would be extended further. As you know, it was for liquor running. I am not as crazy as you might think.” Tate asked,

“Did Pete have any dealing with Norton Littlefield?”

“No. Norton and Janice are above his kind – even, above the likes of Ida. If there was business between them, it had to go through a middleman.” Puzzled, Ethel asked,

“Like who?”

“I don’t know.” At this point the doctor asked Lucille,

“Are all these questions tiring you, Lucille?” After looking about the room, she said,

“How is Max?” With apparent uneasiness, Ethel said,

“I’m sure that nothing has changed: he is with Janice.”

Ethel and Sheriff Tate excused themselves, and then returned to the train platform outside the gate of the hospital. While waiting, Ethel expressed her frustration with Elwood’s unwillingness to tell the full truth – about anything. Tate thought being threatened with death provided sufficient justification. To this he added,

“We do not need more bodies. I have little doubt that somebody of whom we never entertain the slightest suspicion ordered these murders. Their motive is to throw up an obstruction so our inquiry ends with the deceased.”

“What about Norton? He wasn’t a suspect in any investigation.”

“No, but his sister was a suspect in the abduction and attempted murder of the McMillan girl. Do you suppose we missed something there?”

*December 17, 1923.* In a secluded room in the basement of the courthouse, Ethel and Sheriff Tate told Elwood what they learned from their conversation with Lucille. When asked whether there was any truth to it, he said,

“You know what happened to our mama. The part about throwing the lard is true, but there is more to it than that. The street boss told her that she could not marry Pa – he was the brother of the traitor. He said, ‘The Kinsfolk don’t want any more Dibbles.’ When she refused, they made her an example. They kept up their threats after they married. Pa was forced to pay money to keep Mama from disappearing. Then, it stopped. About five years ago, we boys were working late in the garage. This was after the flu, close to Christmas. After locking up, Pete and a couple of ‘gray hoods’ came on us from nowhere. They had guns. Pete took out a couple of coils of blind cord, and said, ‘Here you go, Elwood. Tie your brother’s hands behind his back. Make several loops, and cinch the knots as tight as you can. If I even think he can slip free, I’ll put a bullet in his head right here.’ So, I did. Then Pete tied my hands. Both of us were blindfolded, and put into a car. After a long drive, they took us inside a building. We were made to stand on chairs, and ropes were put around our necks. We were still blindfolded, so I have no idea where they took us. They told us to ‘wait for the verdict.’ Then, they left. It was a long time before they came back – maybe, an hour or more. We knew they were going to pull those chairs out when they came back! The door open, and we said our goodbyes. You couldn’t imagine the shock that came over us when we heard this woman say, ‘Finally, we meet again. I’m sure you recall our first encounter in the cemetery? If there was a third brother, we could even the score. Then again, you do not know who is standing in the third chair. That one has a gag, so you will have to guess.’ She ordered the others in the room to take out the slack in our ropes so that we were standing on our toes. The nooses tighten around our necks to the point where

we had to fight just to keep from passing out. Then, she said, ‘Cut the boys down, and send them back to Pete. I think they understand their lesson. The other stays.’ Both of us thought the third one was Pa or Mama. When we were off the chairs, they gagged us. Then, we were taken back to the car. On the ride back, Pete said, ‘Alright, boys; if I tell you to do something, you do it. The next time we take a ride you are not coming back.’ He left us behind the garage. The third one – if there was a third one – was not Pa or Mama. But from that point forward, we had to do what Pete told us.” Tate said,

“It was Lucille.”

“Good Lord! Ida had us clear out that old brick culvert to the river. Then, she wanted us open up the part that ran under the garage. It was filled with water! We pumped it out, and had to keep pumping it out. There was nowhere the water could go! If we broke through into Ida’s basement, it would flood. You found that thing, so you know how it is. Anyway, that was only half of it. That culvert runs up Mulberry Avenue – under people’s yards – another seven blocks, under the front wall of the cemetery and on to where there used to be an intake. Ida had us lay down wooden tracks in the first section that ran from the river so she could bring up moonshine to her basement. She was in the business before Prohibition – selling it to the bosses in the Horse Pond. She wanted us to build more of that track so a cart could be pulled uphill as far as the cemetery. Once there, the runners would pick up their loads for the county. Norton Littlefield was in on that. I guess there is nothing he can do to hurt us since he is dead. You two discovered the culvert at the river before we started on the rest. It was slave labor!” Ethel asked,

“Do you have any idea who sent that bomb to Ida?”

“No, but Lucille went on and on about some big shot in Atlanta that was going to free her from Ida and Pete. We didn’t think he was real. His name was Mr. Leveque... Mr. Leveque this and Mr. Leveque that... Ida kept Lucille in her pocket. We had the hardest time getting her to the courthouse to sign papers for the ironworks. She was allowed to leave the house with permission and to certain places. When Ida allowed her to help us get the ironworks started up

again, there was somebody outside watching us. Leveque was in her mind. The only fellows named Leveque I know run the department store, and they've always been here. We didn't say anything about it when Lucille was on trial because it might make her look guilty." With those words, Ethel's jaw dropped; Sheriff Tate turned his eyes to the ceiling. After a moment, he said,

"Norton's widow... her maiden name is Leveque. She comes from an old Georgia family. Albert and Gaylord Leveque, the department store owners, are her cousins." Elwood shook his head and mumbled,

"I didn't know that."

"You would, if you read the newspaper. Elwood, you... if Ethel didn't think so highly of you, I'd... well... just, get out of here."

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Though Sheriff Tate had questioned Mrs. Littlefield after Norton was murdered and when the bodies were uncovered in Potters Field, he delayed calling on her a third time. It appeared to him that the poor woman was emotionally battered by the violent death of her husband, and then the terrible revelation emerging about his secret enterprise. Some were saying that he was a mass murderer – "*The Jekyll and Hyde* of Gilridge." After speaking with Elwood, he was considering the adage "birds of a feather." On being seated in the parlor of her home by the housekeeper, Mrs. Deidra Leveque Littlefield entered, dressed in her bereavement attire. Ethel, who was accompanying the sheriff, was struck by her unruffled deportment. Tate said,

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Littlefield. It might relieve you to know that we are not here to subject you to further questions regarding the death of your husband. Nevertheless, your answers might help us find his killer." She sighed and said,

"That is fine, Sheriff; I will help in any way I can."

"Thank you, Mrs. Littlefield. How well do you know Lucille Calder?" For an instance, Deidra was taken aback. She quickly restored her façade.

“Her name is Lucille Calder Huffman. Why she is going by her maiden name is beyond me. She and her husband Peter lived outside of Atlanta. I became acquainted with them after marrying Norton. You might not be aware of this, but before the war – the *War Between the States*, that is – there was fatal enmity between the Leveque and Littlefield families. It appears they put aside their differences when they found a common foe, the carpetbaggers and sundry undesirables. Family is the strongest bond. As for Lucille, after her Peter died, she became unhinged – even abandoned her boy! Unfortunately, Peter’s mother took charge of matters.” Tate interjected.

“Yes, we are aware of the unhappy consequences. Mrs. Calder pinned her hopes on a certain Mr. Leveque from Atlanta rescuing her. Is there such a person?”

“The only Mr. Leveque left in Georgia from our line is my father. While he is always disposed to helping relations – particularly lady ones – it is generally financial assistance, and always transacted through an intermediary. That, if it were Lucille, would be me. Regretfully, it did not happen.”

“What about Albert and Gaylord?”

“They are very nice gentlemen, indeed. Norton was very fond of them.”

“Yes, they are very nice. Getting back to the subject at hand, we recently had a conversation with an associate of Lucille who witnessed two men and a woman – she looked very much like Janice – digging in Potters Field. This witness was with a lady named Susie Hamlin who was later murdered. All this happened some time ago, but our witness has only recently mustered the courage to come forward. Furthermore, there is a second person who witnessed a failed attempt to abduct Miss Hamlin before she disappeared. While the men’s faces were covered by hoods, by looking through a book containing photographs of automobiles, our witness identified the car that they were driving. It was a 1917 Peerless *Model 56*. When we have sufficient evidence to arrest two men, we anticipate being able

to clear your late husband's name of any responsibility of all the murders. One more question before we go. There was a man who assumed the identity of Lucille's late husband. We suspect he was responsible for murdering most of the persons secretly buried in Potters Field. He went by the name of Pete. Did your husband know about this imposter?"

"No... He mentioned nothing about such a person."

On the way back to Sheriff Tate's office, Ethel was sullen. After holding in her frustration long enough, she exclaimed,

"Why did you feed that woman such a cobbled together fiction? You promised Barbara you would not say a word to anybody! Where did the 1917 Peerless *Model 56* come from? What about Elwood? You're fishing!"

"Yes, Ethel; I'm fishing. We are going to keep an eye on Mrs. Littlefield... Albert and Gaylord, too... Albert had a *Model 56* back in 1918. Let's say you were in her place."

"We still do not know why Norton was murdered! If she murdered him for some reason we have not considered, say his late sister's fortune, then pinning the blame on her cousins is a godsend. She does nothing. If Albert and Gaylord murdered Norton at her request, she will have to take care of them. You gave her the advantage. They wouldn't expect it. On the other hand, if she is on the telephone right now telling Albert and Gaylord your tale, they will be after Elwood and Carson!"

"I thought about that. Deputy Fales has a detail on the job. The Dibble boys and their parents are not where they are supposed to be. I'm not using them as bait."

"Yes, you are!"

"No, she will not tell the cousins anything. She knows why I told her. Does your professor fiancé play chess?"

"I play chess! Oh... We will know she told them. What if she is completely innocent?"

"She will be too terrified to say anything. So, what is our lady going to do?"

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Deputies Pender and McCarty, dressed in street clothes, were assigned the task of watching Deidra Littlefield. She left her home at a quarter of eight in the evening carrying her bag and a small suitcase. Without delay, her driver took her to Union Station where she purchased a ticket on the evening express for Orchard Depot, the junction of four major lines located one hundred and ninety miles north of Gilridge. McCarty, instructed by Sheriff Tate to continue his surveillance, purchased a ticket for Orchard. The lady's driver stayed with Mrs. Littlefield until she boarded the train. Pender remained behind at Union Depot, maintaining communications with the sheriff by telephone.

Another two deputies, Anderson and Finney, kept watch at Albert Leveque's house on the Southside, communicating to the office by radio in Morse code. The Gilridge County Sheriff's Department had wireless field telegraph sets in its patrol cars, all surplus equipment from the recent war. While cumbersome and inefficient, the signal from these transmitters carried clearly throughout the vast expanse of the county. Albert and his cousin Gaylord, both bachelors, lived together. The deputies reported that both were at home at a quarter after nine.

Ethel, who was with Sheriff Tate at the office, remarked,

"There are three scheduled stops on the express before Orchard. The first is Wayne City, ninety miles; next, Spring Garden Junction at one hundred and twenty-two miles; finally, Rocky Bluff, one-hundred and sixty miles." Tate said,

"We can rule out a meeting up of the respective parties tonight."

"Not so, Sheriff; it is still possible. The southbound mail train is at Wayne City when the express stops to take on passengers. There is plenty of time to get a ticket. Its last stop before Gilridge is Northeast Depot. As long as I live, I'll never forget what happen

there – well, enough of that. The southbound stops for the mail and takes on passengers at four stations before Northeast. It will be 1:45 in the morning when it stops at Northeast."

"Get on the telephone to your friend Sheriff Cogdell, and ask him to send some of his deputies out to Northeast Depot. Give him a good description of the lady. Hold on! What about the turnout on our side of the river?"

"The train slows, but only stops if somebody is waiting under the lights on the platform... or passengers want to get off. We need somebody there, Sheriff."

"Yes, we didn't think about her driver. I'll wager you a silver dollar he didn't take that car back to her house."

At nine thirty, Albert and Gaylord left their house and proceeded across town to the county road that follows the south bank of the Northeast River. The deputies followed at a distance.

"Albert and Gaylord are heading out of town. What do you make of that, Ethel?"

"Every man for himself?"

"They are certainly traveling light, if that is the case. The Leveque boys did not take anything. I think they are going to meet up. After our little talk, she needs to avoid being seen with them. Whether it is Northeast Depot or the turnout, there will be a car waiting for her."

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Albert and Gaylord drove to the Sandyfield Turnoff in the northern part of the county. From there, they continued east six miles, turning down a wooded dirt road leading to a farm owned by the heirs of the late Carter Lewis. The deputies pulled off the road, taking up station in a patch of woods opposite the drive. At a quarter of eleven, McCarty telephoned from Wayne City Depot. Mrs. Littlefield left the train and purchased a ticket for the southbound as Ethel predicted. He, too, purchased a ticket, and was preparing to board. Ethel said,



"We were right! She is heading back. As for the boys, the turnout is five miles from Sandyfield Road, so that is eleven from the Lewis farm. The county road is paved, but Sandyfield is gravel. Let us say, a half hour of driving. She could make it to the farm at a quarter of three, and return to catch the next northbound train at five o'clock." Tate said,

"Deputies Gibson and McLaughlin are on their way to the turnout. They will hide out of sight on the other side of the tracks. I am counting on the driver staying put until she returns – the less he knows the better. When Mrs. Littlefield starts driving, they'll follow at a distance. We have two hours.

*December 18, 1923, 12:37 A.M.* Shortly after half past twelve, Sheriff Tate received a wireless communication from the deputies watching the Lewis farm that he didn't expect. Albert and Gaylord were back in their car driving on Sandyfield Road. About fifteen minutes later, they reported that the car turned north on the county road heading in the direction of the turnout. It was at this time that Deputy Anderson told his partner that he did not think they were following the same car. Sure, it was a 1922 Dodge Brothers *Series 1* touring car, but the rear glass in the canvas top and the spare were missing. They decided to report the tag number as soon as they came close enough to read it. On seeing their transmission, Ethel exclaimed,

"Oh-no, send somebody out to the Lewis farm! There is somebody else!"

At twelve minutes after one, Anderson and Finney reported that the car they were following past the platform at the turnout and was continuing north. Deputies Gibson and McLaughlin had yet to see Mrs. Littlefield's driver. On hearing this, Tate transmitted a message to all deputies in the northern part of the county to converge at the highway bridge over the Northeast River. It was the only way out of the county in those parts. The car being followed would arrive there in about twenty-five minutes. Not long after this communication, more startling news came from deputies in town watching Mrs.

Littlefield's house. The driver returned and entered! Sheriff Tate instructed his men to bring anybody in the house in for questioning.

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The Dodge Brother touring car was stopped by the roadblock at the highway bridge. The driver was a woman, and it was not Mrs. Littlefield! She was placed under arrest. When the mail train stopped at the turnout, McCarty was the only person who disembarked. Somehow, Mrs. Littlefield gave him the slip. Deputy Pender verified this supposition when the train arrived at Union Station. Sheriff Cogdell reported that no woman left the train at Northeast Depot; then came news that there was no sign of Albert, Gaylord, or their automobile at the Carter Lewis farm.

Shortly after four o'clock, the rear doors of the county jail flew open and in came three deputies escorting a woman of impressive height and build. On seeing her, Ethel gasped,

"The huntress!" She fit Elwood's description of the lady in the cemetery to a detail. The late Janice Littlefield had a remarkable athletic appearance, but nothing like this Valkyrie. Her name was Mavis Bresnahan, a resident of the State of Georgia. The Dodge was registered in her name, and it contained no weapons or contraband. When told that she was being charged with hindering an investigation, Mavis' demeanor was composed and her smile radiated self-satisfaction. Since Albert and Gaylord were not under indictment, that was the best that the sheriff could throw at her. The final portion of frustration was served up before sunrise when Mrs. Littlefield's housekeeper was brought in. She claimed that her employer did not have a driver. Later in the day, Albert's car was found parked at Sykes Landing, not far from Sandyfield Road. After Anderson and Finney set off after the bait, the Leveque boys made their way to the river.

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When morning broke, Ethel told Sheriff Tate that she was going home to rest. Her shift spanned an entire day, and her mental energy had diminished to the point where she remarked that it would be difficult for her to muster the ambition to order breakfast. Tate said,

“It looks like our entire set of suspects skipped town. It might seem like they outsmarted us, but we have seen their hand... and we have somebody new to keep an eye on.” Ethel removed a chocolate bar from her bag. After tearing off the wrapper and taking a bite, she said,

“Well, I suppose we took a step forward... while standing still... I sense somebody of ‘real influence’ is behind all of this – very powerful, almost godlike: the wiping out of a few old families is an inconvenient detail; the poor victims, like Susie Hamlin, have no more significance than a dead opossum on the road. Arranging a shell game with automobiles is child’s play. That said, will we ever know who killed Norton Littlefield... or why? So it is... if something happens today, wake me. I’ll be napping in the broom closet.”